A MAKER OF HISTORY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

И. С. ЛЕЙКОН

A Maker of History

"'Guard this for me,' she whispered." (page 148)

[*Frontispiece*

A Maker of History

By

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Author of "The Master Mummer," "A Prince of Sinners,"
"Mysterious Mr. Sabin," "Anna the Adventuress,"
Etc.

Illustrated from drawings by Fred Pegram

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A MAKER OF HISTORY

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

AN ACCIDENTAL SPY

THE boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. He was stiff, footsore, and a little chilly. There was no manservant arranging his bath and clothes, no pleasant smell of coffee — none of the small luxuries to which he was accustomed. On the contrary, he had slept all night upon a bed of bracken, with no other covering than the stiff pine needles from the tall black trees, whose rustling music had lulled him to sleep.

He sat up, and remembered suddenly where he was and how he had come there. He yawned, and was on the point of struggling to his feet when he became aware of certain changed conditions in his surroundings. Some instinct, of simple curiosity perhaps, but of far-reaching effect, led him to crawl back into his hiding-place and watch.

Last night, after many hours of painful walking, two things alone had impressed themselves upon his consciousness: the dark illimitable forest and the double line of rails, which with the absolute straightness of exact science had stretched behind and in front till the tree-tops in the far distance seemed to touch, and the rails themselves to vanish into the black

heart of the close-growing pines. For miles he had limped along the painfully rough track without seeing the slightest sign of any break in the woods, or any human being. At last the desire for sleep had overtaken him. He was a hardy young Englishman, and a night out of doors in the middle of June under these odorous pines presented itself merely as a not disagreeable adventure. Five minutes after the idea had occurred to him he was asleep.

And now in the gray morning he looked out upon a different scene. Scarcely a dozen yards from him stood a single travelling-coach of dark green, drawn by a heavy engine. At intervals of scarcely twenty paces up and down the line, as far as he could see, soldiers were stationed like sentries. They were looking sharply about in all directions, and he could even hear the footsteps of others crashing through the wood. From the train three or four men in long cloaks had already descended. They were standing in the track talking together.

The young man behind the bracken felt himself in somewhat of a dilemma. There was a delightful smell of fresh coffee from the waiting coach, and there seemed to be not the slightest reason why he should not emerge from his hiding-place and claim the hospitality of these people. He was a quite harmless person, with proper credentials, and an adequate explanation of his presence there. On the other hand, the spirit of adventure natural to his years strongly prompted him to remain where he was and watch. He felt certain that something was going to happen. Besides, those soldiers had exactly the air of looking for somebody to shoot!

Whilst he was hesitating, something did happen.

There was a shrill whistle, a puff of white smoke in the distance, and another train approached from the opposite direction.

It drew up within a few feet of the one which was already waiting. Almost immediately half a dozen men, who were already standing upon the platform of the car, descended. One of these approached rapidly, and saluted the central figure of those who had been talking together in the track. After a few moments' conversation these two, followed by one other man only who was carrying a writing portfolio, ascended the platform of the train which had arrived first and disappeared inside.

The young man who was watching these proceedings yawned.

"No duel, then!" he muttered to himself. "I've half a mind to go out." Then he caught sight of a particularly fierce-looking soldier with his finger already upon the trigger of his gun, and he decided to remain where he was.

In about half an hour the two men reappeared on the platform of the car. Simultaneously the window of the carriage in which they had been sitting was opened, and the third man was visible, standing before a small table and arranging some papers. Suddenly he was called from outside. He thrust his hat upon the papers, and hastened to obey the summons.

A little gust of breeze from the opening and closing of the door detached one of the sheets of paper from the restraining weight of the hat. It fluttered out of the window and lay for a moment upon the side of the track. No one noticed it, and in a second or two it fluttered underneath the clump of bracken behind

which the young Englishman was hiding. He thrust out his hand and calmly secured it.

In less than five minutes the place was deserted. Amidst many hasty farewells, wholly unintelligible to the watcher, the two groups of men separated and climbed into their respective trains. As soon as every one was out of sight the Englishman rose with a little grunt of satisfaction and stretched himself.

He glanced first at the sheet of paper, and finding it written in German thrust it into his pocket. Then he commenced an anxious search for smoking materials, and eventually produced a pipe, a crumpled packet of tobacco, and two matches.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, lighting up. "And now for a tramp."

He plodded steadily along the track for an hour or more. All the time he was in the heart of the forest. Pheasants and rabbits and squirrels continually crossed in front of him. Once a train passed, and an excited guard shouted threats and warnings, to which he replied in fluent but ineffective English.

"Johnnies seem to think I'm trespassing!" he remarked to himself in an aggrieved tone. "I can't help being on their beastly line!"

Tall, smooth-faced, and fair, he walked with the long step and lightsome grace of the athletic young Englishman of his day. He was well dressed in tweed clothes, cut by a good tailor, a little creased by his night out of doors, but otherwise immaculate. He hummed a popular air to himself, and held his head high. If only he were not so hungry.

Then he came to a station. It was little more than a few rows of planks, with a chalet at one end — but a

very welcome sight confronted him. A little pile of luggage, with his initials, G. P., was on the end of the platform nearest to him.

"That conductor was a sensible chap," he exclaimed. "Glad I tipped him. Hullo!"

The station-master, in uniform, came hurrying out. The young Englishman took off his hat, and produced a phrase book from his pocket. He ignored the stream of words which the station-master, with many gesticulations, was already pouring out.

"My luggage," he said firmly, laying one hand upon the pile, and waving the phrase book.

The station-master acquiesced heartily. He waxed eloquent again, but the Englishman was busy with the phrase book.

"Hungry! Hotel?" he attempted.

The station-master pointed to where the smoke was curling upwards from a score or so of houses about half a mile distant. The Englishman was getting pleased with himself. Outside was a weird-looking carriage, and on the box seat, fast asleep, was a very fat man in a shiny hat, ornamented by a bunch of feathers. He pointed to the luggage, then to the cab, and finally to the village.

"Luggage, hotel, carriage!" he suggested.

The station-master beamed all over. With a shout, which must have reached the village, he awakened the sleeping man. In less than five minutes the Englishman and his luggage were stored away in the carriage. His ticket had been examined by the station-master, and smilingly accepted. There were more bows and salutes, and the carriage drove off. Mr. Guy Poynton leaned back amongst the mouldy leather upholstery, and smiled complacently.

"Easiest thing in the world to get on in a foreign country with a phrase book and your wits," he remarked to himself. "Jove, I am hungry!"

He drove into a village of half a dozen houses or so, which reminded him of the pictured abodes of Noah and his brethren. An astonished innkeeper, whose morning attire apparently consisted of trousers, shirt, and spectacles, ushered him into a bare room with a trestle table. Guy produced his phrase book.

"Hungry!" he said vociferously. "Want to eat! Coffee!"

The man appeared to understand, but in case there should have been any mistake Guy followed him into the kitchen. The driver, who had lost no time, was already there, with a long glass of beer before him. Guy produced a mark, laid it on the table, touched himself, the innkeeper, and the driver, and pointed to the beer. The innkeeper understood, and the beer was good.

The driver, who had been of course ludicrously overpaid, settled down in his corner, and announced his intention of seeing through to the end this most extraordinary and Heaven-directed occurrence. The innkeeper and his wife busied themselves with the breakfast, and Guy made remarks every now and then from his phrase book, which were usually incomprehensible, except when they concerned a further supply of beer. With a brave acceptance of the courtesies of the country he had accepted a cigar from the driver, and was already contemplating the awful moment when he would have to light it. Just then an interruption came.

It was something very official, but whether military

or of the police Guy could not tell. It strode into the room with clanking of spurs, and the driver and innkeeper alike stood up in respect. It saluted Guy. Guy took off his hat. Then there came words, but Guy was busy with his phrase book.

"I cannot a word of German speak!" he announced at last.

A deadlock ensued. The innkeeper and the driver rushed into the breach. Conversation became furious. Guy took advantage of the moment to slip the cigar into his pocket, and to light a cigarette. Finally, the officer swung himself round, and departed abruptly.

"Dolmetscher," the driver announced to him triumphantly.

"Dolmetscher," the innkeeper repeated.

Guy turned it up in his phrase book, and found that it meant interpreter. He devoted himself then to stimulating the preparations for breakfast.

The meal was ready at last. There were eggs and ham and veal, dark-colored bread, and coffee, sufficient for about a dozen people. The driver constituted himself host, and Guy, with a shout of laughter, sat down where he was, and ate. In the midst of the meal the officer reappeared, ushering in a small wizened-faced individual of unmistakably English appearance. Guy turned round in his chair, and the newcomer touched his forelock.

"Hullo!" Guy exclaimed. "You're English!"

"Yes, sir!" the man answered. "Came over to train polo ponies for the Prince of Haepsburg. Not in any trouble, I hope, sir?"

"Not I," Guy answered cheerily. "Don't mind my going on with my breakfast, do you? What's it all

about? Who's the gentleman with the fireman's helmet on, and what's he worrying about?"

"He is an officer of the police, sir, on special service," the man answered. "You have been reported for trespassing on the State railway this morning."

"Trespassing be blowed!" Guy answered. "I've got my ticket for the frontier. We were blocked by signal about half a dozen miles off this place, and I got down to stretch my legs. I understood them to say that we could not go on for half an hour or so. They never tried to stop my getting down, and then off they went without any warning, and left me there."

"I will translate to the officer, sir," the man said.

"Right!" Guy declared. "Go ahead."

There was a brisk colloquy between the two. Then the little man began again.

"He says that your train passed here at midnight, and that you did not arrive until past six."

"Quite right!" Guy admitted. "I went to sleep. I didn't know how far it was to the station, and I was dead tired."

"The officer wishes to know whether many trains passed you in the night?"

"Can't say," Guy answered. "I sleep very soundly, and I never opened my eyes after the first few minutes."

"The officer wishes to know whether you saw anything unusual upon the line?" the little man asked.

"Nothing at all," Guy answered coolly. "Bit inquisitive, isn't he?"

The little man came closer to the table.

"He wishes to see your passport, sir," he announced.

Guy handed it to him, also a letter of credit and several other documents.

"He wants to know why you were going to the frontier, sir!"

"Sort of fancy to say that I'd been in Russia, that's all!" Guy answered. "You tell him I'm a perfectly harmless individual. Never been abroad before."

The officer listened, and took notes in his pocketbook of the passport and letter of credit. Then he departed with a formal salute, and they heard his horse's hoofs ring upon the road outside as he galloped away. The little man came close up to the table.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he said, "but you seem to have upset the officials very much by being upon the line last night. There have been some rumors going about — but perhaps you're best not to know that. May I give you a word of advice, sir?"

"Let me give you one," Guy declared. "Try this beer!"

"I thank you, sir," the man answered. "I will do so with pleasure. But if you are really an ordinary tourist, sir, — as I have no doubt you are, — let this man drive you to Streuen, and take the train for the Austrian frontier. You may save yourself a good deal of unpleasantness."

"I'll do it!" Guy declared. "Vienna was the next place I was going to, anyhow. You tell the fellow where to take me, will you?"

The man spoke rapidly to the driver.

"I think that you will be followed, sir," he added, turning to Guy, "but very likely they won't interfere with you. The railway last night for twenty miles back was held up for State purposes. We none of us know why, and it doesn't do to be too curious over

here, but they have an idea that you are either a journalist or a spy."

"*Civis Britannicus sum!*" the boy answered, with a laugh.

"It does n't quite mean what it used to, sir," the man answered quietly.

CHAPTER II

AT THE CAFÉ MONTMARTRE

EXACTLY a week later, at five minutes after midnight, Guy Poynton, in evening dress, entered the Café Montmartre, in Paris. He made his way through the heterogeneous little crowd of men and women who were drinking at the bar, past the scarlet-coated orchestra, into the inner room, where the tables were laid for supper. Monsieur Albert, satisfied with the appearance of his new client, led him at once to a small table, submitted the wine card, and summoned a waiter. With some difficulty, as his French was very little better than his German, he ordered supper, and then lighting a cigarette, leaned back against the wall and looked around to see if he could discover any English or Americans.

The room was only moderately full, for the hour was a little early for this quarter of Paris. Nevertheless, he was quick to appreciate a certain spirit of Bohemianism which pleased him. Every one talked to his neighbor. An American from the further end of the room raised his glass and drank his health. A pretty fair-haired girl leaned over from her table and smiled at him.

"Monsieur like talk with me, eh?"

"English?" he asked.

"No. De Wien!"

He shook his head smilingly.

"We should n't get on," he declared. "Can't speak the language."

She raised her eyebrows with a protesting gesture, but he looked away and opened an illustrated paper by his side. He turned over the pages idly enough at first, but suddenly paused. He whistled softly to himself and stared at the two photographs which filled the sheet.

"By Jove!" he said softly to himself.

There was the rustling of skirts close to his table. An unmistakably English voice addressed him.

"Is it anything very interesting? Do show me!"

He looked up. Mademoiselle Flossie, pleased with his appearance, had paused on her way down the room.

"Come and sit down, and I 'll show it you!" he said, rising. "You 're English, are n't you?"

Mademoiselle Flossie waved a temporary adieu to her friends and accepted the invitation. He poured her out a glass of wine.

"Stay and have supper with me," he begged. "I must be off soon, but I 'm tired of being alone. This is my last night, thank goodness."

"All right!" she answered gayly. "I must go back to my friends directly afterwards."

"Order what you like," he begged. "I can't make these chaps understand me."

She laughed, and called the waiter.

"And now show me what you were looking at in that paper," she insisted.

He pointed to the two photographs.

"I saw those two together only a week ago," he said. "Want to hear about it?"

"'Is there anything very interesting?'"

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She looked startled for a moment, and a little incredulous.

"Yes, go on!" she said.

He told her the story. She listened with an interest which surprised him. Once or twice when he looked up he fancied that the lady from Vienna was also doing her best to listen. When he had finished their supper had arrived.

"I think," she said, as she helped herself to *hors d'œuvre*, "that you were very fortunate to get away."

He laughed carelessly.

"The joke of it is," he said, "I've been followed all the way here. One fellow, who pretended he got in at Strasburg, was trying to talk to me all the time, but I saw him sneak in at Vienna, and I wasn't having any. I say, do you come here every evening?"

"Very often," she answered. "I dance at the Comique, and then we generally go to Maxim's to supper, and up here afterwards. "I'll introduce you to my friends afterwards, if you like, and we'll all sit together. If you're very good I'll dance to you!"

"Delighted," he answered, "if they speak English. I'm sick of trying to make people understand my rotten French."

She nodded.

"They speak English all right. I wish that horrid Viennese girl wouldn't try to listen to every word we say."

He smiled.

"She wanted me to sit at her table," he remarked.

Mademoiselle Flossie looked at him warningly, and dropped her voice.

"Better be careful!" she whispered. "They say she's a spy!"

"On my track very likely," he declared with a grin.

She threw herself back in her seat and laughed.

"Conceited! Why should any one want to be on your track? Come and see me dance at the Comique to-morrow night."

"Can't," he declared. "My sister's coming over from England."

"Stupid!"

"Oh, I'll come one night," he declared. "Order some coffee, won't you — and what liqueurs?"

"I'll go and fetch my friends," she declared, rising. "We'll all have coffee together."

"Who are they?" he asked.

She pointed to a little group down the room — two men and a woman. The men were French, one middle-aged and one young, dark, immaculate, and with the slightly bored air affected by young Frenchmen of fashion; the woman was strikingly handsome and magnificently dressed. They were quite the most distinguished-looking people in the room.

"If you think they'll come," he remarked doubtfully. "Aren't we rather comfortable as we are?"

She made her way between the tables.

"Oh, they'll come," she declared. "They're pals!"

She floated down the room with a cigarette in her mouth, very graceful in her airy muslin skirts and large hat. Guy followed her admiringly with his eyes. The Viennese lady suddenly tore off a corner of her menu and scribbled something quickly. She passed it over to Guy.

"Read!" she said imperatively.

He nodded, and opened it.

"*Prenez garde!*" he said slowly. Then he looked at her and shook his head. She was making signs to him to destroy her message, and he at once did so.

"Don't understand!" he said. "Sorry!"

Mademoiselle Flossie was laughing and talking with her friends. Presently they rose, and came across the room with her. Guy stood up and bowed. The introductions were informal, but he felt his insular prejudices a little shattered by the delightful ease with which these two Frenchmen accepted the situation. Their breeding was as obvious as their *bonhomie*. The table was speedily rearranged to find places for them all.

"Your friends will take coffee with me, Mademoiselle," Guy said. "Do be hostess, please. My attempts at French will only amuse everybody."

The elder of the two Frenchmen, whom the waiter addressed as Monsieur le Baron, and every one else as Louis, held up his hand.

"With pleasure!" he declared, "later on. Just now it is too early. We will celebrate *l'entente cordiale*. *Garçon*, a magnum of Pommery, *un neu frappé!* I know you will forgive the liberty," he said, smiling at Guy. "This bottle is vowed. Flossie has smiled for the first time for three evenings."

She threw a paper fan at him, and sat down again by Guy.

"Do tell him the story you told me," she whispered in his ear. "Louis, listen!"

Guy retold his story. Monsieur le Baron listened intently. So did the lady who had accompanied him. Guy felt that he told it very well, but for the second time he omitted all mention of that missing sheet of

paper which had come into his possession. Monsieur le Baron was obviously much interested.

"You are quite sure — of the two men?" he asked quietly.

"Quite!" Guy answered confidently. "One was ——"

Madame — Flossie's friend — dropped a wineglass. Monsieur le Baron raised his hand.

"No names," he said. "It is better not. We understand. A most interesting adventure, Monsieur Poynton, and — to your health!"

The wine was good, and the fun of the place itself went almost to the head. Always there were newcomers who passed down the room amidst a chorus of greetings, always the gayest of music. Then amidst cheers Flossie and another friend whom she called from a distant table danced a cake-walk — danced very gracefully, and with a marvellous display of rainbow skirts. She came back breathless, and threw herself down by Guy's side.

"Give me some more wine!" she panted. "How close the place is!"

The younger Frenchman, who had scarcely spoken, leaned over.

"An idea!" he exclaimed. "My automobile is outside. I will drive you all round the city. Monsieur Poynton shall see Paris undressed. Afterwards we will go to Louis' rooms and make his man cook us a *déjeuner Anglais*."

Flossie stood up and laughed.

"Who 'll lend me a coat?" she cried. "I've nothing but a lace mantle."

"Plenty of Frenchmen in the car," the young French-

man cried. "Are we all agreed? Good! *Garçon, l'addition!*"

"And mine," Guy ordered.

The women departed for their wraps. Guy and the two Frenchmen filled their pockets with cigarettes. When the bills came Guy found that his own was a trifle, and Monsieur Louis waved aside all protest.

"We are hosts to-night, my young friend," he declared with charming insistence. "Another time you shall have your turn. You must come round to the club to-morrow, and we will arrange for some sport. *Allons!*"

They crowded out together amidst a chorus of farewells. Guy took Flossie's arm going down the stairs.

"I say, I'm awfully obliged to you for introducing me to your friends," he declared. "I'm having a ripping time!"

She laughed.

"Oh, they're all right," she declared. "Mind my skirts!"

"I say, what does '*prenez garde*' mean?" he asked.

"'Take care.' Why?"

He laughed again.

"Nothing!"

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"MADEMOISELLE," the young man said, with an air of somewhat weary politeness, "I regret to say that there is nothing more to be done!"

He was grieved and polite because Mademoiselle was beautiful and in trouble. For the rest he was a little tired of her. Brothers of twenty-one, who have never been in Paris before, and cannot speak the language, must occasionally get lost, and the British Embassy is not exactly a transported Scotland Yard.

"Then," she declared, with a vigorous little stamp of her shapely foot, "I don't see what we keep an Ambassador here for at all — or any of you. It is scandalous!"

The Hon. Nigel Fergusson dropped his eyeglass and surveyed the young lady attentively.

"My dear Miss Poynton," he said, "I will not presume to argue with you. We are here, I suppose, for some purpose or other. Whether we fulfil it or not may well be a matter of opinion. But that purpose is certainly not to look after any young idiot — you must excuse my speaking plainly — who runs amuck in this most fascinating city. In your case the Chief has gone out of his way to help you. He has interviewed the chief of police himself, brought his influence to bear in various quarters, and I can

tell you conscientiously that everything which possibly can be done is being done at the present moment. If you wish for my advice it is this: Send for some friend to keep you company here, and try to be patient. You are in all probability making yourself needlessly miserable."

She looked at him a little reproachfully. He noticed, however, with secret joy that she was drawing on her gloves.

"Patient! He was to meet me here ten days ago. He arrived at the hotel. His clothes are all there, and his bill unpaid. He went out the night of his arrival, and has never returned. Patient! Well, I am much obliged to you, Mr. Fergusson. I have no doubt that you have done all that your duty required. Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon, Miss Poynton, and don't be too despondent. Remember that the French police are the cleverest in the world, and they are working for you."

She looked up at him scornfully.

"Police, indeed!" she answered. "Do you know that all they have done so far is to keep sending for me to go and look at dead bodies down at the Morgue? I think that I shall send over for an English detective."

"You might do worse," he answered; "but in any case, Miss Poynton, I do hope that you will send over for some friend or relation to keep you company. Paris is scarcely a fit place for you to be alone and in trouble."

"Thank you," she said. "I will remember what you have said."

The young man watched her depart with a curious mixture of relief and regret.

"The young fool's been the usual round, I suppose, and he's either too much ashamed of himself or too besotted to turn up. I wish she was n't quite so devilish good-looking," he remarked to himself. "If she goes about alone she'll get badly scared before she's finished."

Phyllis Poynton drove straight back to her hotel and went to her room. A sympathetic chambermaid followed her in.

"Mademoiselle has news yet of her brother?" she inquired.

Mademoiselle shook her head. Indeed her face was sufficient answer.

"None at all, Marie."

The chambermaid closed the door.

"It would help Mademoiselle, perhaps, if she knew where the young gentleman spent the evening before he disappeared?" she inquired mysteriously.

"Of course! That is just what I want to find out."

Marie smiled.

"There is a young man here in the barber's shop, Mademoiselle," she announced. "He remembers Monsieur Poynton quite well. He went in there to be shaved, and he asked some questions. I think if Mademoiselle were to see him!"

The girl jumped up at once.

"Do you know his name?" she asked.

"Monsieur Alphonse, they call him. He is on duty now."

Phillis Poynton descended at once to the ground floor of the hotel, and pushed open the glass door which led into the coiffeur's shop. Monsieur Alphonse was waiting upon a customer, and she was given a chair. In

a few minutes he descended the spiral iron staircase and desired to know Mademoiselle's pleasure.

"You speak English?" she asked.

"But certainly, Mademoiselle."

She gave a little sigh of relief.

"I wonder," she said, "if you remember waiting upon my brother last Thursday week. He was tall and fair, and something like me. He had just arrived in Paris."

Monsieur Alphonse smiled. He rarely forgot a face, aud the young Englishman's tip had been munificent.

"Perfectly, Mademoiselle," he answered. "They sent for me because Monsieur spoke no French."

"My chambermaid, Marie, told me that you might perhaps know how he proposed to spend the evening," she continued. "He was quite a stranger in Paris, and he may have asked for some information."

Monsieur Alphonse smiled, and extended his hands.

"It is quite true," he answered. "He asked me where to go, and I say to the Folies Bergères. Then he said he had heard a good deal of the supper cafés, and he asked me which was the most amusing. I tell him the Café Montmartre. He wrote it down."

"Do you think that he meant to go there?" she asked.

"But certainly. He promised to come and tell me the next day how he amused himself."

"The Café Montmartre. Where is it?" she asked.

"In the Place de Montmartre. But Mademoiselle pardons — she will understand that it is a place for men."

"Are women not admitted?" she asked.

Alphonse smiled.

"But — yes. Only Mademoiselle understands that

if a lady should go there she would need to be very well escorted."

She rose and slipped a coin into his hand.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said. "By the bye, have any other people made inquiries of you concerning my brother?"

"No one at all, Mademoiselle!" the man answered.

She almost slammed the door behind when she went out.

"And they say that the French police are the cleverest in the world," she exclaimed indignantly.

Monsieur Alphonse watched her through the glass pane.

"*Ciel!* But she is pretty!" he murmured to himself.

. . . . . .

She turned into the writing-room, and taking off her gloves she wrote a letter. Her pretty fingers were innocent of rings, and her handwriting was a little shaky. Nevertheless, it is certain that not a man passed through the room who did not find an excuse to steal a second glance at her. This is what she wrote:—

"My dear Andrew,—I am in great distress here, and very unhappy. I should have written to you before, but I know that you have your own trouble to bear just now, and I hated to bother you. I arrived here punctually on the date arranged upon between Guy and myself, and found that he had arrived the night before, and had engaged a room for me. He was out when I came. I changed my clothes and sat down to wait for him. He did not return. I made inquiries and found that

he had left the hotel at eight o'clock the previous evening. To cut the matter short, ten days have now elapsed and he has not yet returned.

"I have been to the Embassy, to the police, and to the Morgue. Nowhere have I found the slightest trace of him. No one seems to take the least interest in his disappearance. The police shrug their shoulders, and look at me as though I ought to understand — he will return very shortly they are quite sure. At the Embassy they have begun to look upon me as a nuisance. The Morgue — Heaven send that I may one day forget the horror of my hasty visits there. I have come to the conclusion, Andrew, that I must search for him myself. How, I do not know; where, I do not know. But I shall not leave Paris until I have found him.

"Andrew, what I want is a friend here. A few months ago I should not have hesitated a moment to ask you to come to me. To-day that is impossible. Your presence here would only be an embarrassment to both of us. Do you know of any one who would come? I have not a single relative whom I can ask to help me. Would you advise me to write to Scotland Yard for a detective, or go to one of these agencies? If not, can you think of any one who would come here and help me, either for your sake as your friend, or, better still, a detective who can speak French and whom one can trust? All our lives Guy and I have congratulated ourselves that we have no relation nearer than India. I am finding out the other side of it now.

"I know that you will do what you can for me, Andrew. Write to me by return.

"Yours in great trouble and distress,

"PHYLLIS POYNTON."

She sealed and addressed her letter, and saw it despatched. Afterwards she crossed the courtyard to the restaurant, and did her best to eat some dinner. When she had finished it was only half-past eight. She rang for the lift and ascended to the fourth floor. On her way down the corridor a sudden thought struck her. She took a key from her pocket and entered the room which her brother had occupied.

His things were still lying about in some disorder, and neither of his trunks was locked. She went down on her knees and calmly proceeded to go through his belongings. It was rather a forlorn hope, but it seemed to her just possible that there might be in some of his pockets a letter which would throw light upon his disappearance. She found nothing of the sort, however. There were picture postcards, a few photographs, and a good many restaurant bills, but they were all from places in Germany and Austria. At the bottom of the second trunk, however, she found something which he had evidently considered it worth while to preserve carefully. It was a thick sheet of official-looking paper, bearing at the top an embossed crown, and covered with German writing. It was numbered at the top "seventeen," and it was evidently an odd sheet of some document. She folded it carefully up, and took it back with her to her own room. Then, with the help of a German dictionary, she commenced to study it. At the end of an hour she had made out a rough translation, which she read carefully through. When she had finished she was thoroughly perplexed. She had an uncomfortable sense of having come into touch with something wholly unexpected and mysterious.

"What am I to do?" she said to herself softly.

"What can it mean? Where on earth can Guy — have found this?"

There was no one to answer her, no one to advise. An overwhelming sense of her own loneliness brought the tears into her eyes. She sat for some time with her face buried in her hands. Then she rose up, calmly destroyed her translation with minute care, and locked away the mysterious sheet at the bottom of her dressing-bag. The more she thought of it the less, after all, she felt inclined to connect it with his disappearance.

CHAPTER IV

THE FALLING OF THE HANDKERCHIEF

MONSIEUR ALBERT looked over her shoulder for the man who must surely be in attendance — but he looked in vain.

"Mademoiselle wishes a table — for herself alone!" he repeated doubtfully.

"If you please," she answered.

It was obvious that Mademoiselle was of the class which does not frequent night cafés alone, but after all that was scarcely Monsieur Albert's concern. She came perhaps from that strange land of the free, whose daughters had long ago kicked over the barriers of sex with the same abandon that Mademoiselle Flossie would display the soles of her feet a few hours later in their national dance. If she had chanced to raise her veil no earthly persuasions on her part would have secured for her the freedom of that little room, for Monsieur Albert's appreciation of likeness was equal to his memory for faces. But it was not until she was comfortably ensconced at a corner table, from which she had a good view of the room, that she did so, and Monsieur Albert realized with a philosophic shrug of the shoulders the error he had committed.

Phyllis looked about her with some curiosity. It was too early for the habitués of the place, and most of the tables were empty. The scarlet-coated band were smoking cigarettes, and had not yet produced their instru-

ments. The conductor curled his black moustache and stared hard at the beautiful young English lady, without, however, being able to attract a single glance in return. One or two men also tried to convey to her by smiles and glances the fact that her solitude need continue no longer than she chose. The unattached ladies put their heads together and discussed her with little peals of laughter. To all of these things she remained indifferent. She ordered a supper which she ate mechanically, and wine which she scarcely drank. All the while she was considering. Now that she was here what could she do? Of whom was she to make inquiries? She scanned the faces of the newcomers with a certain grave curiosity which puzzled them. She neither invited nor repelled notice. She remained entirely at her ease.

Monsieur Albert, during one of his peregrinations round the room, passed close to her table. She stopped him.

"I trust that Mademoiselle is well served!" he remarked with a little bow.

"Excellently, I thank you," she answered.

He would have passed on, but she detained him.

"You have very many visitors here," she remarked. "Is it the same always?"

He smiled.

"To-night," he declared, "it is nothing. There are many who come here every evening. They amuse themselves here."

"You have a good many strangers also?" she asked.

"But certainly," he declared. "All the time!"

"I have a brother," she said, "who was here eleven nights ago — let me see — that would be last Tuesday

week. He is tall and fair, about twenty-one, and they say like me. I wonder if you remember him."

Monsieur Albert shook his head slowly.

"That is strange," he declared, "for as a rule I forget no one. Last Tuesday week I remember perfectly well. It was a quiet evening. La Scala was here — but of the rest no one. If Mademoiselle's brother was here it is most strange."

Her lip quivered for a moment. She was disappointed.

"I am so sorry," she said. "I hoped that you might have been able to help me. He left the Grand Hotel on that night with the intention of coming here — and he never returned. I have been very much worried ever since."

She was no great judge of character, but Monsieur Albert's sympathy did not impress her with its sincerity.

"If Mademoiselle desires," he said, "I will make inquiries amongst the waiters. I very much fear, however, that she will obtain no news here."

He departed, and Phyllis watched him talking to some of the waiters and the leader of the orchestra.

Presently he returned.

"I am very sorry," he announced, "but the brother of Mademoiselle could not have come here. I have inquired of the garçons, and of Monsieur Jules there, who forgets no one. They answer all the same."

"Thank you very much," she answered. "It must have been somewhere else!"

She was unreasonably disappointed. It had been a very slender chance, but at least it was something tangible. She had scarcely expected to have it snapped so soon and so thoroughly. She dropped her veil to hide the tears which she felt were not far from her eyes, and summoned

the waiter for her bill. There seemed to be no object in staying longer. Suddenly the unexpected happened.

A hand, flashing with jewels, was rested for a moment upon her table. When it was withdrawn a scrap of paper remained there.

Phyllis looked up in amazement. The girl to whom the hand had belonged was sitting at the next table, but her head was turned away, and she seemed to be only concerned in watching the door. She drew the scrap of paper towards her and cautiously opened it. This is what she read, written in English, but with a foreign turn to most of the letters: —

"Monsieur Albert lied. Your brother was here. Wait till I speak to you."

Instinctively she crumpled up this strange little note in her hand. She struggled hard to maintain her composure. She had at once the idea that every one in the place was looking at her. Monsieur Albert, indeed, on his way down the room wondered what had driven the hopeless expression from her face.

The waiter brought her bill. She paid it and tipped him with prodigality which for a woman was almost reckless. Then she ordered coffee, and after a second's hesitation cigarettes. Why not? Nearly all the women were smoking, and she desired to pass for the moment as one of them. For the first time she ventured to gaze at her neighbor.

It was the young lady from Vienna. She was dressed in a wonderful demi-toilette of white lace, and she wore a large picture hat adjusted at exactly the right angle for her profile. From her throat and bosom there flashed the sparkle of many gems — the finger which held her cigarette was ablaze with diamonds. She leaned

back in her seat smoking lazily, and she met Phyllis's furtive gaze with almost insolent coldness. But a moment later, when Monsieur Albert's back was turned, she leaned forward and addressed her rapidly.

"A man will come here," she said, "who could tell you, if he was willing, all that you seek to know. He will come to-night — he comes all the nights. You will see I hold my handkerchief so in my right hand. When he comes I shall drop it — so!"

The girl's swift speech, her half-fearful glances towards the door, puzzled Phyllis.

"Can you not come nearer to me and talk?" she asked.

"No! You must not speak to me again. You must not let any one, especially the man himself, know what I have told you. No more now. Watch for the handkerchief!"

"But what shall I say to him?"

The girl took no notice of her. She was looking in the opposite direction. She seemed to have edged away as far as possible from her. Phyllis drew a long breath.

She felt her heart beating with excitement. The place suddenly seemed to her like part of a nightmare.

And then all was clear again. Fortune was on her side. The secret of Guy's disappearance was in this room, and a few careless words from the girl at the next table had told her more than an entire police system had been able to discover. But why the mystery? What was she to say to the man when he came? The girl from Vienna was talking to some friends and toying carelessly with a little morsel of lace which she had drawn from her bosom. Phyllis watched it with the

eyes of a cat. Every now and then she watched also the door.

The place was much fuller now. Mademoiselle Flossie had arrived with a small company of friends from Maxim's. The music was playing all the time. The popping of corks was almost incessant, the volume of sound had swelled. The laughter and greeting of friends betrayed more abandon than earlier in the evening. Old acquaintances had been renewed, and new ones made. Mademoiselle from Vienna was surrounded by a little circle of admirers. Still she held in her right hand a crumpled up little ball of lace.

Men passing down the room tried to attract the attention of the beautiful young English demoiselle who looked out upon the little scene so indifferently as regarded individuals, and yet with such eager interest as a whole. No one was bold enough, however, to make a second effort. Necessity at times gives birth to a swift capacity. Fresh from her simple country life, Phyllis found herself still able with effortless serenity to confound the most hardened boulevarders who paused to ogle her. Her eyes and lips expressed with ease the most convincing and absolute indifference to their approaches. A man may sometimes brave anger; he rarely has courage to combat indifference. So Phyllis held her own and waited.

And at last the handkerchief fell. Phyllis felt her own heart almost stop beating, as she gazed down the room. A man of medium height, dark, distinguished, was slowly approaching her, exchanging greetings on every side. His languid eyes fell upon Phyllis. Those who had watched her previously saw then a change. The cold indifference had vanished from her face. She

leaned forward as though anxious to attract his attention. She succeeded easily enough.

He was almost opposite her table, and her half smile seemed to leave him but little choice. He touched the back of the chair which fronted hers, and took off his hat.

"Mademoiselle permits?" he asked softly.

"But certainly," she answered. "It is you for whom I have been waiting!"

"Mademoiselle flatters me!" he murmured, more than a little astonished.

"Not in the least," she answered. "I have been waiting to ask you what has become of my brother — Guy Poynton!"

He drew out the chair and seated himself. His eyes never left her face.

"Mademoiselle," he murmured, "this is most extraordinary!"

She noticed then that his hands were trembling.

CHAPTER V

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

"I AM asking a great deal of you, George! I know it. But you see how helpless I am — and read the letter — read it for yourself."

He passed Phyllis's letter across the small round dining-table. His guest took it and read it carefully through.

"How old is the young lady?" he asked.

"Twenty-three!"

"And the boy?"

"Twenty-one."

"Orphans, I think you said?"

"Orphans and relationless."

"Well off?"

"Moderately."

Duncombe leaned back in his chair and sipped his port thoughtfully,

"It is an extraordinary situation!" he remarked.

"Extraordinary indeed," his friend assented. "But so far as I am concerned you can see how I am fixed. I am older than either of them, but I have always been their nearest neighbor and their most intimate friend. If ever they have needed advice they have come to me for it. If ever I have needed a day's shooting for myself or a friend I have gone to them. This Continental tour of theirs we discussed and planned out, months beforehand. If my misfortune had not come on just when it did I should have gone with them, and even up to the

last we hoped that I might be able to go to Paris with Phyllis."

Duncombe nodded.

"Tell me about the boy," he said.

His host shrugged his shoulders.

"You know what they're like at that age," he remarked. "He was at Harrow, but he shied at college, and there was no one to insist upon his going. The pair of them had only a firm of lawyers for guardians. He's just a good-looking, clean-minded, high-spirited young fellow, full of beans, and needing the bit every now and then. But, of course, he's no different from the run of young fellows of his age, and if an adventure came his way I suppose he'd see it through."

"And the girl?"

Andrew Pelham rose from his seat.

"I will show you her photograph," he said.

He passed into an inner room divided from the dining-room by curtains. In a moment or two he reappeared.

"Here it is!" he said, and laid a picture upon the table.

Now Duncombe was a young man who prided himself a little on being unimpressionable. He took up the picture with a certain tolerant interest and examined it, at first without any special feeling. Yet in a moment or two he felt himself grateful for those great disfiguring glasses from behind which his host was temporarily, at least, blind to all that passed. A curious disturbance seemed to have passed into his blood. He felt his eyes brighten, and his breath come a little quicker, as he unconsciously created in his imagination the living

presentment of the girl whose picture he was still holding. Tall she was, and slim, with a soft, white throat, and long, graceful neck; eyes rather darker than her complexion warranted, a little narrow, but bright as stars — a mouth with the divine lines of humor and understanding. It was only a picture, but a realization of the living image seemed to be creeping in upon him. He made the excuse of seeking a better light, and moved across to a distant lamp. He bent over the picture, but it was not the picture which he saw. He saw the girl herself, and even with the half-formed thought he saw her expression change. He saw her eyes lit with sorrow and appeal — he saw her arms outstretched towards him — he seemed even to hear her soft cry. He knew then what his answer would be to his friend's prayer. He thought no more of the excuses which he had been building in his mind; of all the practical suggestions which he had been prepared to make. Common-sense died away within him. The matter-of-fact man of thirty was ready to tread in the footsteps of this great predecessor, and play the modern knight-errant with the whole-heartedness of Don Quixote himself. He fancied himself by her side, and his heart leaped with joy of it. He thought no more of abandoned cricket matches and neglected house parties. A finger of fire had been laid upon his somewhat torpid flesh and blood.

"Well?" Andrew asked.

Duncombe returned to the table, and laid the picture down with a reluctance which he could scarcely conceal.

"Very nice photograph," he remarked. "Taken locally?"

"I took it myself," Andrew answered. "I used to

be rather great at that sort of thing before — before my eyes went dicky."

Duncombe resumed his seat. He helped himself to another glass of wine.

"I presume," he said, "from the fact that you call yourself their nearest friend, that the young lady is not engaged?"

"No," Andrew answered slowly. "She is not engaged."

Something a little different in his voice caught his friend's attention. Duncombe eyed him keenly. He was conscious of a sense of apprehension. He leaned over the table.

"Do you mean, Andrew ——?" he asked hoarsely. "Do you mean ——?"

"Yes, I mean that," his friend answered quietly. "Nice sort of old fool, am I not? I'm twelve years older than she is, I'm only moderately well off and less than moderately good-looking. But after all I'm only human, and I've seen her grow up from a fresh, charming child into one of God's wonderful women. Even a gardener, you know, George, loves the roses he has planted and watched over. I've taught her a little and helped her a little, and I've watched her cross the borderland."

"Does she know?"

Andrew shook his head doubtfully.

"I think," he said, "that she was beginning to guess. Three months ago I should have spoken — but my trouble came. I didn't mean to tell you this, but perhaps it is as well that you should know. You can understand now what I am suffering. To think of her there alone almost maddens me."

Duncombe rose suddenly from his seat.

"Come out into the garden, Andrew," he said. "I feel stifled here."

His host rose and took Duncombe's arm. They passed out through the French window on to the gravel path which circled the cedar-shaded lawn. A shower had fallen barely an hour since, and the air was full of fresh delicate fragrance. Birds were singing in the dripping trees, blackbirds were busy in the grass. The perfume from the wet lilac shrubs was a very dream of sweetness. Andrew pointed across a park which sloped down to the garden boundary.

"Up there, amongst the elm trees, George," he said, "can you see a gleam of white? That is the Hall, just to the left of the rookery."

Duncombe nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I can see it."

"Guy and she walked down so often after dinner," he said quietly. "I have stood here and watched them. Sometimes she came alone. What a long time ago that seems!"

Duncombe's grip upon his arm tightened.

"Andrew," he said, "I can't go!"

There was a short silence. Andrew stood quite still. All around them was the soft weeping of dripping shrubs. An odorous whiff from the walled rose-garden floated down the air.

"I 'm sorry, George! It 's a lot to ask you, I know."

"It is n't that!"

Andrew turned his head toward his friend. The tone puzzled him.

"I don't understand."

"No wonder, old fellow! I don't understand myself."

There was another short silence. Andrew stood with his almost sightless eyes turned upon his friend, and Duncombe was looking up through the elm trees to the Hall. He was trying to fancy her as she must have appeared to this man who dwelt alone, walking down the meadow in the evening.

"No," he repeated softly, "I don't understand myself. You've known me for a long time, Andrew. You wouldn't write me down as altogether a sentimental ass, would you?"

"I should not, George. I should never even use the word 'sentimental' in connection with you."

Duncombe turned and faced him squarely. He laid his hands upon his friend's shoulders.

"Old man," he said, "here's the truth. So far as a man can be said to have lost his heart without rhyme or reason, I've lost mine to the girl of that picture."

Andrew drew a quick breath.

"Rubbish, George!" he exclaimed. "Why, you never saw her. You don't know her!"

"It is quite true," Duncombe answered. "And yet — I have seen her picture."

His friend laughed queerly.

"You, George Duncombe, in love with a picture. Stony-hearted George, we used to call you. I can't believe it! I can't take you seriously. It's all rot, you know, isn't it! It must be rot!"

"It sounds like it," Duncombe answered quietly. "Put it this way, if you like. I have seen a picture of the woman whom, if ever I meet, I most surely shall love. What there is that speaks to me from that picture I do not know. You say that only love can beget

love. Then there is that in the picture which points beyond. You see, I have talked like this in an attempt to be honest. You have told me that you care for her. Therefore I have told you these strange things. Now do you wish me to go to Paris, for if you say yes I shall surely go!"

Again Andrew laughed, and this time his mirth sounded more natural.

"Let me see," he said. "We drank Pontet Canet for dinner. You refused liqueurs, but I think you drank two glasses of port. George, what has come over you? What has stirred your slow-moving blood to fancies like these? Bah! We are playing with one another. Listen! For the sake of our friendship, George, I beg you to grant me this great favor. Go to Paris to-morrow and help Phyllis!"

"You mean it?"

"God knows I do. If ever I took you seriously, George — if ever I feared to lose the woman I love — well, I should be a coward for my own sake to rob her of help when she needs it so greatly. Be her friend, George, and mine. For the rest the fates must provide!"

"The fates!" Duncombe answered. "Ay, it seems to me that they have been busy about my head to-night. It is settled, then. I will go!"

CHAPTER VI

THE VANISHING LADY

AT precisely half-past nine on the following evening Duncombe alighted from his *petite voiture* in the courtyard of the Grand Hotel, and making his way into the office engaged a room. And then he asked the question which a hundred times on the way over he had imagined himself asking. A man to whom nervousness in any shape was almost unknown, he found himself only able to control his voice and manner with the greatest difficulty. In a few moments he might see her.

"You have a young English lady — Miss Poynton — staying here, I believe," he said. "Can you tell me if she is in now?"

The clerk looked at him with sudden interest.

"Miss Poynton is staying here, sir," he said. "I do not believe that she is in just now. Will you wait one moment!"

He disappeared rapidly, and was absent for several minutes. When he returned he came out into the reception hall.

"The manager would be much obliged if you would step into his office for a moment, sir," he said confidentially. "Will you come this way?"

Duncombe followed him into a small room behind the counter. A gray-haired man rose from his desk and saluted him courteously.

"Sir George Duncombe, I believe," he said. "Will you kindly take a seat?"

Duncombe did as he was asked. All the time he felt that the manager was scrutinizing him curiously.

"Your clerk," he said, "told me that you wished to speak to me."

"Exactly!" the manager answered. "You inquired when you came in for Miss Poynton. May I ask — are you a friend of hers?"

"I am here on behalf of her friends," Duncombe answered. "I have letters to her."

The manager bowed gravely.

"I trust," he said, "that you will soon have an opportunity to deliver them. We are not, of course, responsible in any way for the conduct or doings of our clients here, but I am bound to say that both the young people of the name you mention have been the cause of much anxiety to us."

"What do you mean?" Duncombe asked quickly.

"Mr. Guy Poynton," the manager continued, "arrived here about three weeks ago, and took a room for himself and one for his sister, who was to arrive on the following day. He went out that same evening, and has never since returned. Of that fact you are no doubt aware."

Duncombe nodded impatiently.

"Yes!" he said. "That is why I am here."

"His sister arrived on the following day, and was naturally very distressed. We did all that we could for her. We put her in the way of communicating with the police and the Embassy here, and we gave her every assistance that was possible. Four nights ago Mademoiselle went out late. Since then we have seen nothing of her. Mademoiselle also has disappeared."

Duncombe sprang to his feet. He was suddenly pale.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Four nights ago! She went out alone, you say?"

"How else? She had no friends here. Once or twice at my suggestion she had taken one of our guides with her, but she discontinued this as she fancied that it made her conspicuous. She was all the time going round to places making inquiries about her brother."

Duncombe felt himself suddenly precipitated into a new world — a nightmare of horrors. He was no stranger in the city, and grim possibilities unfolded themselves before his eyes. Four nights ago!

"You have sent — to the police?"

"Naturally. But in Paris — Monsieur must excuse me if I speak plainly — a disappearance of this sort is never regarded seriously by them. You know the life here without doubt, Monsieur! Your accent proves that you are well acquainted with the city. No doubt their conclusions are based upon direct observation, and in most cases are correct — but it is very certain that Monsieur the Superintendent regards such disappearances as these as due to one cause only."

Duncombe frowned, and something flashed in his eyes which made the manager very glad that he had not put forward this suggestion on his own account.

"With regard to the boy," he said, "this might be likely enough. But with regard to the young lady it is of course wildly preposterous. I will go to the police myself," he added, rising.

"One moment, Sir George," the manager continued. "The disappearance of the young lady was a source of much trouble to me, and I made all possible inquiries within the hotel. I found that on the day of her dis-

appearance Mademoiselle had been told by one of the attendants in the barber's shop, who had waited upon her brother on the night of his arrival, that he — Monsieur Guy — had asked for the name of some cafés for supper, and that he had recommended Café Montmartre. Mademoiselle appears to have decided to go there herself to make inquiries. We have no doubt that when she left the hotel on the night of her disappearance it was to there that she went."

"You have told the police this?"

"Yes, I have told them," the manager answered dryly. "Here is their latest report, if you care to see it."

Duncombe took the little slip of paper and read it hastily.

"Disappearance of Mademoiselle Poynton, from England. — We regret to state no trace has been discovered of the missing young lady.

"(Signed) JULES LEGARDE, Superintendent."

"That was only issued a few hours ago," the manager said.

"And I thought," Duncombe said bitterly, "that the French police were the best in the world!"

The manager said nothing. Duncombe rose from his chair.

"I shall go myself to the Café Montmartre," he said. The manager bowed.

"I shall be glad," he said, "to divest myself of any further responsibility in this matter. It has been a source of much anxiety to the directors as well as myself."

Duncombe walked out of the room, and putting on

his coat again called for a *petite voiture.* He gave the man the address in the Rue St. Honoré and was driven to a block of flats there over some shops.

"Is Monsieur Spencer in?" he asked the concierge. He was directed to the first floor. An English manservant admitted him, and a few moments later he was shaking hands with a man who was seated before a table covered with loose sheets of paper.

"Duncombe, by all that's wonderful!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand. "Why, I thought that you had shaken the dust of the city from your feet forever, and turned country squire. Sit down! What will you have?"

"First of all, am I disturbing you?"

Spencer shook his head.

"I've no Press work to-night," he answered. "I've a clear hour to give you at any rate. When did you come?"

"Two-twenty from Charing Cross," Duncombe answered. "I can't tell you how thankful I am to find you in, Spencer. I'm over on a very serious matter, and I want your advice."

Spencer touched the bell. Cigars and cigarettes, whisky and soda, appeared as though by magic.

"Now help yourself and go ahead, old chap," his host declared. "I'm a good listener."

He proved himself so, sitting with half-closed eyes and an air of close attention until he had heard the whole story. He did not once interrupt, but when Duncombe had finished he asked a question.

"What did you say was the name of this café where the boy had disappeared?"

"Café Montmartre."

Spencer sat up in his chair. His expression had changed.

"The devil!" he murmured softly.

"You know the place?"

"Very well. It has an extraordinary reputation. I am sorry to say it, Duncombe, but it is a very bad place for your friend to have disappeared from."

"Why?"

"In the first place it is the resort of a good many of the most dangerous people in Europe — people who play the game through to the end. It is a perfect hot-bed of political intrigue, and it is under police protection."

"Police protection! A place like that!" Duncombe exclaimed.

"Not as you and I understand it, perhaps," Spencer explained. "There is no Scotland Yard extending a protecting arm over the place, and that sort of thing, But the place is haunted by spies, and there are intrigues carried on there in which the secret service police often take a hand. In return it is generally very hard to get to the bottom of any disappearance or even robbery there through the usual channels. To the casual visitor, and of course it attracts thousands from its reputation, it presents no more dangers perhaps than the ordinary night café of its sort. But I could think of a dozen men in Paris to-day, who, if they entered it, I honestly believe would never be seen again."

Spencer was exaggerating, Duncombe murmured to himself. He was a newspaper correspondent, and he saw these things with the halo of melodrama around them. And yet — four nights ago. His face was white and haggard.

"The boy," he said, "could have been no more than

an ordinary visitor. He had no great sum of money with him, he had no secrets, he did not even speak the language. Surely he would have been too small fry for the intriguers of such a place!"

"One would think so," Spencer answered musingly. "You are sure that he was only what you say?"

"He was barely twenty-one," Duncombe answered, "and he had never been out of England before."

"What about the girl?"

"She is two years older. It was her first visit to Paris." Spencer nodded.

"The disappearance of the boy is of course the riddle," he remarked. "If you solve that you arrive also at his sister's whereabouts. Upon my word, it is a poser. If it had been the boy alone — well, one could understand. The most beautiful ladies in Paris are at the Montmartre. No one is admitted who is not what they consider — chic! The great dancers and actresses are given handsome presents to show themselves there. On a representative evening it is probably the most brilliant little roomful in Europe. The boy of course might have lost his head easily enough, and then been ashamed to face his sister. But when you tell me of her disappearance, too, you confound me utterly. Is she good-looking?"

"Very!"

"She would go there, of course, asking for her brother," Spencer continued thoughtfully. "An utterly absurd thing to do, but no doubt she did, and — look here, Duncombe, I tell you what I 'll do. I have my own two news-grabbers at hand, and nothing particular for them to do this evening. I 'll send them up to the Café Montmartre."

"It 's awfully good of you, Spencer. I was going myself," Duncombe said, a little doubtfully.

"You idiot!" his friend said cheerfully, yet with a certain emphasis. "English from your hair to your boots, you 'd go in there and attempt to pump people who have been playing the game all their lives, and who would give you exactly what information suited their books. They 'd know what you were there for, the moment you opened your mouth. Honestly, what manner of good do you think that you could do? You 'd learn what they chose to tell you. If there 's really anything serious behind all this, do you suppose it would be the truth?"

"You 're quite right, I suppose," Duncombe admitted, "but it seems beastly to be doing nothing."

"Better be doing nothing than doing harm!" Spencer declared. "Look round the other cafés and the boulevards. And come here at eleven to-morrow morning. We 'll breakfast together at Paillard's."

CHAPTER VII

THE DECOY-HOUSE OF EUROPE

SPENCER wrote out his luncheon with the extreme care of the man to whom eating has passed to its proper place amongst the arts, and left to Duncombe the momentous question of red wine or white. Finally, he leaned back in his chair, and looked thoughtfully across at his companion.

"Sir George," he said, "you have placed me in a very painful position."

Duncombe glanced up from his *hors d'œuvre*.

"What do you mean?"

"I will explain," Spencer continued. "You came to me last night with a story in which I hope that I showed a reasonable amount of interest, but in which, as a matter of fact, I was not interested at all. Girls and boys who come to Paris for the first time in their lives unattended, and find their way to the Café Montmartre, and such places, generally end up in the same place. It would have sounded brutal if I had added to your distress last night by talking like this, so I determined to put you in the way of finding out for yourself. I sent two of my most successful news-scouts to that place last night, and I had not the slightest doubt as to the nature of the information which they would bring back. It turns out that I was mistaken."

"What did they discover?" Duncombe asked eagerly.

"Nothing!"

Duncombe's face fell, but he looked a little puzzled.

"Nothing? I don't understand. They must have heard that they had been there anyhow."

"They discovered nothing. You do not understand the significance of this. I do! It means that I was mistaken for one thing. Their disappearance has more in it than the usual significance. Evil may have come to them, but not the ordinary sort of evil. Listen! You say that the police have disappointed you in having discovered nothing. That is no longer extraordinary to me. The police, or those who stand behind them, are interested in this case, and in the withholding of information concerning it."

"You are talking riddles to me, Spencer," Duncombe declared. "Do you mean that the police in Paris may become the hired tools of malefactors?"

"Not altogether that," Spencer said, waving aside a dish presented before him by the head waiter himself with a gesture of approval. "Not necessarily malefactors. But there are other powers to be taken into consideration, and most unaccountably your two friends are in deeper water than your story led me to expect. Now, not another question, please, until you have tried that sauce. Absolute silence, if you please, for at least three or four minutes."

Duncombe obeyed with an ill grace. He had little curiosity as to its flavor, and a very small appetite at all with the conversation in its present position. He waited for the stipulated time, however, and then leaned once more across the table.

"Spencer!"

"First I must have your judgment upon the sauce. Did you find enough mussels?"

"Damn the sauce!" Duncombe answered. "Forgive me, Spencer, but this affair is, after all, a serious one to me. You say that your two scouts, as you call them, discovered nothing. Well, they had only one evening at it. Will they try again in other directions? Can I engage them to work for me? Money is absolutely no object."

Spencer shook his head.

"Duncombe," he said, "you're going to think me a poor sort of friend, but the truth is best. You must not count upon me any more. I cannot lift even my little finger to help you. I can only give you advice if you want it."

"And that?"

"Go back to England to-morrow. Chuck it altogether. You are up against too big a combination. You can do no one any good. You are a great deal more likely to come to harm yourself."

Duncombe was quite quiet for several moments. When he spoke again his manner had a new stiffness.

"You have surprised me a good deal, I must confess, Spencer. We will abandon the subject."

Spencer shrugged his shoulders.

"I know how you're feeling, old chap," he said. "I can't help it. You understand my position here. I write a daily letter for the best paying and most generous newspaper in the world, and it is absolutely necessary that I keep hand in glove with the people in high places here. My position absolutely demands it, and my duty to my chief necessitates my putting all personal feeling on one side in a case like this when a conflict arises."

"But where," Duncombe asked, "does the conflict arise?"

"Here!" Spencer answered. "I received a note this morning from a great personage in this country to whom I am under more obligation than any other breathing man, requesting me to refrain from making any further inquiries or assisting any one else to make them in this matter. I can assure you that I was thunderstruck, but the note is in my pocket at the present moment."

"Does it mention them by name?"

"The exact words are," Spencer answered, "'respecting the reported disappearance of the young Englishman, Mr. Guy Poynton, and his sister.' This will just show you how much you have to hope for from the police, for the person whose signature is at the foot of that note could command the implicit obedience of the whole system."

Duncombe's cheeks were a little flushed. He was British to the backbone, and his obstinacy was being stirred.

"The more reason," he said quietly, "so far as I can see, that I should continue my independent efforts with such help as I can secure. This girl and boy are fellow country-people, and I haven't any intention of leaving them in the clutches of any brutal gang of Frenchmen into whose hands they may have got. I shall go on doing what I can, Spencer."

The journalist shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't help sympathizing with you, Duncombe," he said, "but keep reasonable. You know your Paris well enough to understand that you haven't a thousand to one chance. Besides, Frenchmen are not brutal. If the boy got into a scrape, it was probably his own fault."

"And the girl? What of her? Am I to leave her to the tender mercies of whatever particular crew of blackguards may have got her into their power?"

"You are needlessly melodramatic," Spencer answered. "I will admit, of course, that her position may be an unfortunate one, but the personage whom I have the honor to call my friend does not often protect blackguards. Be reasonable, Duncombe! These young people are not relatives of yours, are they?"

"No!"

"Nor very old friends? The young lady, for instance?"

Duncombe looked up, and his face was set in grim and dogged lines. He felt like a man who was nailing his colors to the mast.

"The young lady," he said, "is, I pray Heaven, my future wife!"

Spencer was honestly amazed, and a little shocked.

"Forgive me, Duncombe," he said. "I had no idea — though perhaps I ought to have guessed."

They went on with their luncheon in silence for some time, except for a few general remarks. But after the coffee had been brought and the cigarettes were alight, Spencer leaned once more across the table.

"Tell me, Duncombe, what you mean to do."

"I shall go to the Café Montmartre myself to-night. At such a place there must be hangers-on and parasites who see something of the game. I shall try to come into touch with them. I am rich enough to outbid the others who exact their silence."

"You must be rich enough to buy their lives then," Spencer answered gravely, "for if you do succeed in

tempting any one to betray the inner happenings of that place on which the seal of silence has been put, you will hear of them in the Morgue before a fortnight has passed."

"They must take their risk," Duncombe said coldly. "I am going to stuff my pockets with money to-night, and I shall bid high. I shall leave word at the hotel where I am going. If anything happens to me there — well, I don't think the Café Montmartre will flourish afterwards."

"Duncombe," his friend said gravely, "nothing will happen to you at the Café Montmartre. Nothing ever does happen to any one there. You remember poor De Laurson?"

"Quite well. He was stabbed by a girl in the Rue Pigalle."

"He was stabbed in the Café Montmartre, but his body was found in the Rue Pigalle. Then there was the Vicomte de Sauvinac."

"He was found dead in his study — poisoned."

"He was found there — yes, but the poison was given to him in the Café Montmartre, and it was there that he died. I am behind the scenes in some of these matters, but I know enough to hold my tongue, or my London letter would n't be worth a pound a week. I am giving myself away to you now, Duncombe. I am risking a position which it has taken me twenty years to secure. I 've got to tell you these things, and you must do as I tell you. Go back to London!"

Duncombe laughed as he rose to his feet.

"Not though the Vicomte's fate is to be mine to-night," he answered. "The worse hell this place is the worse the crew it must shelter. I should never hold

my head up again if I sneaked off home and left the girl in their hands. I don't see how you can even suggest it."

"Only because you can't do the least good," Spencer answered. "And besides, don't run away with a false impression. The place is dangerous only for certain people. The authorities don't protect murderers or thieves except under special circumstances. The Vicomte's murderer and De Laurson's were brought to justice. Only they keep the name of the place out of it always. Tourists in shoals visit it, and visit safely every evening. They pay fancy prices for what they have, but I think they get their money's worth. But for certain classes of people it is the decoy house of Europe. Foreign spies have babbled away their secrets there, and the greatest criminals of the world have whispered away their lives to some fair daughter of Judas at those tables. I, who am behind the scenes, tell you these things, Duncombe."

Duncombe smiled.

"To-morrow," he said, "you may add another victim to your chamber of horrors!"

CHAPTER VIII

DUNCOMBE'S "HOLD-UP"

THE amber wine fell in a little wavering stream from his upraised glass on to the table-cloth below. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at his three guests with a fatuous smile. The girl in blue, with the dazzlingly fair hair and wonderful complexion, steadied his hand and exchanged a meaning look with the man who sat opposite. Surely the poor fool was ready for the plucking? But Madame, who sat beside her, frowned upon them both. She had seen things which had puzzled her. She signed to them to wait.

She leaned over and flashed her great black eyes upon him.

"Monsieur enjoys himself like this every night in Paris?"

A soft, a very seductive, voice. The woman who envied her success compared it to the purring of a cat. Men as a rule found no fault with it, especially those who heard it for the first time.

Duncombe set down his glass, now almost empty. He looked from the stain on the table-cloth into the eyes of Madame, and again she thought them very unlike the eyes of a drunken man.

"Why not? It's the one city in the world to enjoy one's self in. Half-past four, and here we are as jolly as anything. Chucked out of everywhere in London at half-past twelve. 'Time, gentlemen, please!'

And out go the lights. Jove, I wonder what they'd think of this at the Continental! Let's — let's have another bottle."

The fair-haired girl — Flossie to her friends, Mademoiselle Mermillon until you had been introduced — whispered in his ear. He shook his head vaguely. She had her arm round his neck. He removed it gently.

"We'll have another here first anyhow," he declared. "Hi, Garçon! Ring the bell, there's a good chap, Monsieur — dash it, I've forgotten your name. No, don't move. I'll do it myself."

He rose and staggered towards the door.

"The bell is n't that way, Monsieur," Madame exclaimed. "It is to the right. Louis, quick!"

Monsieur Louis sprang to his feet. There was a queer grating little sound, followed by a sharp click. Duncombe had swung round and faced them. He had turned the key in the door, and was calmly pocketing it. The hand which held that small shining revolver was certainly not the hand of a drunken man.

They all three looked at him in wonder — Madame, Monsieur Louis, and Mademoiselle Flossie. The dark eyebrows of Madame almost met, and her eyes were full of the promise of evil things. Monsieur Louis, cowering back from that steadily pointed revolver, was white with the inherited cowardice of the degenerate. Flossie, who had drunk more wine than any of them, was trying to look as though it were a joke. Duncombe, with his disordered evening clothes, his stained shirt-front and errant tie, was master of the situation. He came and stood a few feet away from them. His blundering French accent and slow choice of words had

"He came and stood a few feet away from them."

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departed. He spoke to them without hesitation, and his French was almost as good as their own.

"I want you to keep your places," he said, "and listen to me for a few minutes. I can assure you I am neither mad nor drunk. I have a few questions to ask you, and if your answers are satisfactory you may yet find my acquaintance as profitable as though I had been the pigeon I seemed. Keep your seat, Monsieur le Baron!"

Monsieur Louis, who had half risen, sat down again hastily. They all watched him from their places around the table. It was Madame whom he addressed more directly — Madame with the jet black hair and golden earrings, the pale cheeks and scarlet lips.

"I invited you into a private room here," he said, "because what I have said to you three is between ourselves alone. You came, I presume, because it promised to be profitable. All that I want from you is information. And for that I am willing to pay."

Monsieur Louis interposed. He stroked his little black moustache with a much beringed hand. With the other he gesticulated.

"Monsieur talks reasonably," he declared, "but why all this mystery? Why this feigned drunkenness? Why the show of arms? If we can help Monsieur — it is an affair of pleasure, and if he chooses to make a present to these ladies in return — why, no doubt they will be charmed. Me, I presume, he has no intention to insult. Permit me, Monsieur."

He drew a card from a small gold case, and presented it to Duncombe, who accepted it with a little bow.

"If I can aid you in any way," Monsieur Louis

continued, "I am entirely at your service, but I require first of all that in addressing us you recognize my position as a French nobleman, who amuses himself in this place as you, Monsieur, also do, and also that you unlock that door."

Duncombe smiled quietly.

"Monsieur le Baron," he said, "I think that we are very well as we are — secure from interruption. I have sent others here on this same mission, and they did not succeed. Both of these ladies, I believe, have been approached for the information I desire, and they have thought well to withhold it. I have set my heart upon success this time, and I wish to secure at least the opportunity of being heard."

Monsieur Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"There are secrets," he murmured; "affairs of honor ——"

Duncombe interrupted him.

"Monsieur Louis," he said, "I am not so young as I look, and I have lived in Paris. I know that this café, for all its outward smartness, bears perhaps the worst reputation in Europe. I have heard of you three many times — the 'Trinity from Hell,' they call you sometimes, I think. You see I know where I am and the risk I run. Even this little room has its secrets — a murder or two, I believe, and other things — secrets which I don't suppose there is gold enough in France to buy. Well, I don't want to buy them. You can go your way so far as I am concerned. There is only one thing I want to know from you, and for that I offer you — the ladies, of course, I mean — five thousand francs each."

"Five thousand francs!" Madame murmured.

Mademoiselle Flossie said nothing, but her eyes shone.

"The question, Monsieur?"

"What has become of Mademoiselle Phyllis Poynton, the young English lady?"

The eyes of Madame seemed to narrow for a moment. Monsieur Louis lit a cigarette with fingers which shook a little, and the fair face of Mademoiselle Flossie was suddenly white. Then they all three looked at one another.

"Do you know whom Monsieur may mean?"

"Not I!"

"An English girl! There are none come here."

"Mademoiselle Poynton! It is a name unheard of."

The young Englishman smiled upon them grimly.

"Madame," he said, "you have in your satchel — don't move, if you please — a roll of French notes — indeed you must not move — very cleverly abstracted from my pocket by my charming young companion, Mademoiselle Flossie here. Now I have at least half a dozen friends in the café below whom I could summon here by touching that bell, and the identification of those notes would be a perfectly simple matter. Shall I do it? Or will you earn another roll by giving me the information I seek?"

Madame leaned forward and whispered in the man's ear. Monsieur Louis nodded.

"Tell him," Mademoiselle Flossie murmured tremulously. "Monsieur will not break faith with us. He will not let it be known from whence he gained the knowledge."

"Agreed!" the young Englishman declared. "Go on."

Madame held up her hand.

"I," she said, "will tell Monsieur what we know."

She rose to her feet and leaned over the table. The blue-black sequins on her dress glittered and shone in the dull light. Her figure was superb, her neck and bosom a flawless white. The Englishman, however, was unmoved. His keen gray eyes were fixed upon her, but the revolver remained in his right hand. From downstairs they could hear the music of violins, the rattle of glasses, the hum of voices and laughter. Madame frowned slightly as she marked the young Englishman's alertness. She was used to victims, and his imperturbability annoyed her.

"I trust," she said, "that you will remember, Monsieur, that I am breaking a pledged word. If Monsieur the Director here knew that I was telling you of Mademoiselle Poynton there would be much trouble for all of us."

Duncombe nodded.

"Go on," he said.

"Mademoiselle came here first about a month or perhaps six weeks ago," she said. "From that time on she was a regular visitor. She came alone. She spoke to no one. She was always a mystery. She was very handsomely dressed — for an English girl, quite chic! She spent money, and Monsieur Albert the director kept always a table for her. As time went on we began to feel the mystery. We asked ourselves for what purpose does she come here? For what, indeed!

"One night Monsieur Albert, who was always besieged with questions about her, took too much wine. I have seen that happen with him but once — since that time never. He told us about Mademoiselle. She

made some inquiries about her brother, and Monsieur Albert was able to tell her his whereabouts. After that he scarcely expected to see her again, but the next night she was here also.

"Then Monsieur Albert learned more. Mademoiselle was in a small way an artist, and she had conceived the idea of painting a picture of the café — an early morning picture of effects, Monsieur understands. There was to be the morning sunlight streaming across the supper-tables, the faces of all of us aged and haggard. Monsieur Louis here, without doubt, a very child of the devil! Oh, a very moral picture, Monsieur. It was to convert us all. Monsieur Albert declared that he would arrange to have it here on exhibition, and we should all mend our ways. Monsieur knew perhaps that the young lady was an artist?"

The question was flashed suddenly upon him as though the intention was to take him by surprise. Duncombe, however, remained unmoved.

"I am here, Madame, to ask, not to answer, questions," he said. "Will you kindly proceed? I am greatly interested."

Madame put her hand to her throat for a moment as though to loosen her necklace. She had not the appearance of being greatly in love with her questioner.

"There came a night," she continued, "when Mademoiselle broke through her rule. A man came in and sat at her table. His name was the Vicomte D'Aubarde, and he was known to most of us, though to the young lady he appeared to be a stranger. They talked earnestly for an hour or more. When she left — he accompanied her!"

The Englishman had grown paler. Madame saw it

and smiled. Her lover perhaps! It was good to make him suffer.

"Flossie here," she continued, "was outside, and saw them depart. They drove off together in the Vicomte's coupé. They were apparently on the best of terms. Since then we have not seen her again — nor the Vicomte. Monsieur knows now as much as we know."

"And how long ago is that?" Duncombe asked quietly.

"A week to-night," Madame replied.

Duncombe laid down a roll of notes upon the table.

"I wish," he said, "to prove to you that I am in earnest. I am therefore going to pay you the amount I promised, although I am perfectly well aware that the story of Madame is — false!"

"Monsieur!"

"As I remarked," he repeated, "false. Now listen to me. I want to tempt one of you, I don't care which, to break through this thieves' compact of yours. I have paid a thousand francs for lies — I will pay ten thousand francs for truth! Ten thousand francs for the present whereabouts of Mademoiselle Phyllis Poynton!"

Mademoiselle Flossie looked up at him quickly. Then she glanced furtively at Madame, and the flash of Madame's eyes was like lightning upon blue steel. Duncombe moved towards the door.

"I will pay the bill downstairs," he said. "Good night! Think over what I have said. Ten thousand francs!"

Monsieur Louis stood up and bowed stiffly. Made-

moiselle Flossie ventured to throw him a kiss. Madame smiled inscrutably.

The door closed. They heard him go downstairs. Madame picked up his card and read aloud.

Sir George Duncombe,
Risley Hall,
Norfolk.

Grand Hotel, Paris.

"If one could only," Madame murmured, "tell him the truth, collect the money — and ——"

"And," Flossie murmured, half fearfully.

Monsieur le Baron smiled!

CHAPTER IX

THE STORY OF A CALL

MADEMOISELLE MERMILLON was not warmly welcomed at the Grand Hotel. The porter believed that Sir George Duncombe was out. He would inquire, if Mademoiselle would wait, but he did not usher her into the drawing-room, as would have been his duty in an ordinary case, or even ask her to take a seat.

Mademoiselle Mermillon was of the order of young person who resents, but this afternoon she was far too nervous. During the porter's temporary absence she started at every footstep, and scrutinized anxiously every passer-by. Often she looked behind her through the glass doors into the street. When at last he reappeared alone her disappointment was obvious.

"Sir George Duncombe is out, Mademoiselle," he announced. "Will you be pleased to leave a message, or your name?"

"You do not know how long he will be?" she inquired.

"Sir George left no word," the man answered. "He has been out since before *déjeuner*."

Mademoiselle decided to leave a note. The porter supplied her with notepaper and envelopes. She sat down at a small round table, and once more glanced furtively around. Convinced that she was not being watched, she hastily wrote a few lines, sealed and addressed the envelope, and handed it to the porter.

"You will give this to Sir George immediately he returns," she begged. "It is important."

"Monsieur shall have it without doubt, Mademoiselle," the man answered.

She pulled down her veil and left the place hurriedly. When she reached the boulevard she slackened her pace, and drew a little breath of relief.

"Ten thousand francs!" she murmured to herself. "If I took that with me they would receive me at home. I might start all over again. It is worth a little risk. Heavens, how nervous I am!"

She entered a café and drank *à petit verre.* As she set her glass down a man looked at her over the top of his newspaper. She tried to smile, but her heart was beating, and she was sick with fear.

"What a fool I am!" she muttered. "It is a stranger, too. If he were one of Gustav's lot I should know him."

She returned his smile, and he came and sat down beside her. They had another liqueur. Later they left the place together.

. . . . . .

Duncombe returned to his hotel tired out after a disappointing day spent in making fruitless inquiries in various parts of Paris. He had learnt nothing. He seemed as far off the truth as ever. He opened the note which the porter handed him listlessly enough. Afterwards, however, it was different. This is what he read: —

"I can tell you about the young English lady if you will promise upon your honor that you will not betray me. I dare not come here again. I dare not even speak

to you while the others are about. Go to the Café Sylvain to-night and order dinner in a private room. I will come at half-past seven. — FLOSSIE."

Duncombe drew a little sigh of relief. At last then he was to know something. He was very English, a bad amateur detective, and very weary of his task. Nothing but his intense interest in the girl herself — an interest which seemed to have upset the whole tenor of his life — would have kept him here plodding so relentlessly away at a task which seemed daily to present more difficulties and complications. Yet so absorbed had he become that the ordinary duties and pleasures which made up the routine of his life scarcely ever entered into his mind. There had been men coming down to shoot, whom in an ordinary way he would not have dreamed of putting off — a cricket match which had been postponed until his return, and which he had completely forgotten. Paris had nothing in the shape of amusement to offer him in place of these things, yet in his own mind these things were as if they had not been. Every interest and energy of his life was concentrated upon the one simple object of his search.

He gave the man half a crown, and walked to the lift whistling. The porter shook his head, and Duncombe receded considerably in his estimation, notwithstanding the tip. He considered Mademoiselle Flossie a little obvious for a gentleman of Duncombe's class. Duncombe treated himself to a cocktail and a cigarette as he changed his clothes. It was positively the first gleam of hope he had had. And then suddenly he remembered Spencer's warning, and he became grave.

He was at the Café Sylvain early. He ordered dinner,

gave elaborate instructions about a young lady when she arrived, and with a glass of absinthe and another cigarette sat down to wait. At a quarter to eight he began to get restless. He summoned the waiter again, and gave a more detailed description of Mademoiselle Flossie. The waiter was regretful but positive. No young lady of any description had arrived expecting to meet a gentleman in a private room. Duncombe tried him with her name. But yes, Mademoiselle Mermillon was exceedingly well known there! He would give orders that she should be shown up immediately she arrived. It would be soon, without doubt.

At a quarter-past eight Duncombe dined alone, too disappointed to resent the waiter's sympathetic attitude. At nine o'clock he returned to the hotel on the chance that a message might have been sent there. He read the English newspapers, and wrote letters until midnight. Then he ordered a carriage and drove to the Café Montmartre.

He mounted the stairs and passed through the little bar which led into the supper-room. Monsieur Albert came forward with a low bow.

"You can find me a table, I suppose?" Duncombe remarked, looking round. "Where shall I sit?"

Monsieur Albert shook his head slowly. His hands were outstretched, his manner sad, but resigned.

"I am very sorry, Monsieur, but to-night every place is taken. I have had to turn others away already," he declared. "A thousand regrets."

Duncombe looked at him astonished. The place was more than half empty.

"Surely you can find me a small table somewhere," he said. "I was here last evening, you know. If it is

because I am alone I will order supper for two and a magnum of wine."

Monsieur Albert was immovable. He remembered Duncombe well, and he was proud of his patronage, but to-night it was impossible to offer him a table. Duncombe began to be annoyed.

"Very well," he said, "I will stay in the bar. You can't turn me out of there, can you?"

Monsieur Albert was evasive. He desired Monsieur Duncombe to be amused, and the people who remained in the bar — well, it was not possible to get rid of them, but they were not fitting company for him.

"There is the Café Mazarin," he added confidentially, "a few steps only from here — a most amusing place. The most wonderful ladies there, too, very chic, and crowded every night! Monsieur should really try it. The commissionaire would direct him — a few yards only."

"Much obliged to you," Duncombe answered, turning on his heel. "I may look in there presently."

He seated himself at a small round table and ordered a drink. The people here were of a slightly different class from those who had the *entrée* to the supper-room and were mostly crowded round the bar itself. At a small desk within a few feet of him a middle-aged woman with a cold, hard face sat with a book of account before her and a pile of bills. There was something almost Sphynx-like about her appearance. She never spoke. Her expression never changed. Once their eyes met. She looked at him steadfastly, but said nothing. The girl behind the bar also took note of him. She was very tall and slim, absolutely colorless, and with coils of fair hair drawn tightly back from her fore-

head. She was never without a cigarette, lighting a fresh one always from its predecessor, talking all the while unceasingly, but without the slightest change of expression. Once she waved the men and girls who stood talking to her on one side, and Duncombe fancied that it was because she desired a better view of him.

Suddenly he was startled by a voice close at hand. He looked up. The woman at the desk was speaking to him.

"Monsieur would be well advised," she said, "if he departed."

Duncombe looked at her in amazement. She was writing rapidly in her book, and her eyes were fixed upon her work. If he had not actually heard her, it would have been hard to believe that she had spoken.

"But why, Madame?" he asked. "Why should I go? I am in no one's way. I can pay for what I have."

She dipped her pen in the ink.

"I know nothing of Monsieur or his business," she said, still without even glancing towards him, "but I know that Monsieur Albert does not wish him to remain."

"The devil take Monsieur Albert!" Duncombe answered angrily. "I am waiting to speak to some one who comes here regularly, and I shall stay until she comes."

The woman wrote steadily for a moment. Then she blotted the page on which she had been writing, and raising her head, looked at him.

"It is no affair of mine," she said, "but Monsieur Albert has sent for the police. They may say that you have had too much wine, or that you owe money. In

either case you will be removed. The police will not listen to you. Monsieur Albert has special discretion. It is no affair of mine," she repeated, "but if I were Monsieur I would go."

Duncombe rose slowly to his feet, and summoning a waiter paid his bill. The man produced a second one, dated a few days back, for a large amount.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "I do not owe you anything."

"Monsieur was here with a party last Thursday night," he said glibly. "He promised to pay the next time. I will call the manager."

Duncombe tore the bill in half and turned away. He bowed to the lady at the desk.

"I see that you were right," he said. "I will leave."

"Monsieur is wise," she answered without looking up.

He left the café without speaking to any one further. When he reached the pavement he slipped a five-franc piece into the hand of the tall commissionaire.

"You know most of the young ladies who come here, I suppose?" he asked.

"But certainly!" the man answered with a smile, "Monsieur desires?"

"I want the address of a young lady named Mermillon — Flossie, I think they call her," Duncombe said.

"Thirty-one, Rue Pigalle," the man answered promptly. "But she should be here within an hour. She never misses."

Duncombe thanked him, and hailed a carriage.

"Shall I give Mademoiselle any message?" the man asked confidentially.

"I am going to call for her," Duncombe answered. "If I do not find her I will return."

To drive to the Rue Pigalle was an affair of five minutes only. Duncombe climbed a couple of flights of narrow stairs, pushed open a swing gate, and found himself in front of an office, in which an elderly woman sat reading.

"Can you tell me where to find Mademoiselle Mermillon?" Duncombe asked.

"Next floor; first door on the left," the woman answered. "Mademoiselle is not often in at this hour, though."

Duncombe thanked her, and climbed another flight of stairs. He had to strike a match to look for a bell or knocker, and then found neither. He knocked on the door with his knuckles. There was no reply. He was on the point of departure, when he noticed that the door was ajar. After a moment's hesitation he pushed it open.

He found himself in a narrow passage, with dresses and other articles of apparel hanging from a row of pegs on the wall. The place was in complete darkness. He struck another match. At the end of the passage was an inner door, also ajar. He rapped upon it, and finally pushed it open. Just then his match went out!

CHAPTER X

SPENCER'S SURPRISE

DUNCOMBE had the nerves and temperament of the young Englishman of his class, whose life is mostly spent out of doors, and who has been an athlete all his days. But nevertheless at that moment he was afraid. Something in the stillness of the room oppressed him. He could see nothing, hear nothing except the clock ticking upon the mantlepiece. And yet he was afraid.

He fumbled desperately in his pocket for his match-box. When he had found it he discovered that it was empty. With a sense of positive relief he backed out of the room and hastily descended the stairs. The old lady was still in her sitting-room reading the paper. She set it down at his entrance, and looked at him over the top of her spectacles.

"Pardon, Madame," he said, removing his hat, "I find the rooms of Mademoiselle are open, but all is in darkness. I cannot make any one hear."

Madame took up her paper.

"Then Mademoiselle is probably out," she declared. "It is generally so at this hour. Monsieur can leave his name."

"But the doors are all open!" Duncombe said.

"I go presently and close them," Madame answered. "The careless hussy!"

Duncombe produced a small piece of gold. Madame

laid down the paper at once. She looked at it as though ready to snatch it from his hand.

"Madame would oblige me very much if she would ascend with me at once," Duncombe said. "I should like to make quite sure whether the young lady is there or not."

Madame was on her feet with remarkable celerity. She accepted the coin and carefully placed it in a purse drawn from somewhere amongst the folds of her voluminous skirts.

"We shall need a candle," Duncombe reminded her.

She lit a lamp, talking all the while.

"Monsieur is very generous," she declared. "Mademoiselle Flossie is a charming young lady. No wonder she has many friends. There was one," she continued, "who came here with her this afternoon — but he left almost at once," she added hastily, aware of her indiscretion. "Ah, these stairs! They grow steeper for one so corpulent. At last!"

She pushed open the door and went sideways down the narrow passage. Directly they had entered it they had a view of the room beyond. Madame cried out, and Duncombe felt all his vague fears spring into a terrified apprehension of actual evil.

The curtain before the window had been hastily drawn, but the lamp which the portress carried was sufficient feebly to illuminate the room. The tablecloth and a broken vase lay upon the floor. A few feet off was an overturned chair. Upon the canopied bed lay a prostrate figure, the head thrown back at an unnatural angle, the eyes open but glazed. Duncombe dared do no more than cast one single horrified glance at it. Madame set down the lamp upon the table, and made the room hideous with shrieks.

"Good God!" she cried. "It is the little one who is dead!"

Duncombe himself fetched in the gendarmes, and waited whilst they took voluminous notes of the occurrence. The murder seemed to them and to Madame to be one of a very common class. The assassin had left no clue whatever behind him. The poor girl's rings had been torn from her fingers, her little stock of jewellery ransacked, her purse was empty, everything of value had been taken. There was not a shred of evidence against any one. Madame, who had seen the man upon the stairs, could only say that he was short, and wore a black felt hat. The officer who took down what they had to say shrugged his shoulders as he replaced the book in his pocket. The affair would pass most certainly, he feared, into the long list of undiscoverable crimes.

Duncombe left his name and address, and enough money for the funeral. Then he returned to his hotel. This was the end, then, of the clue from which he had hoped so much. Spencer's warning as to what would surely happen to those whom he might succeed in bribing came back into his mind with sickening insistence. In a measure he was responsible for the girl's death. After all, what chance had he? He was fighting against powers which, moving always in the darkness, seemed able with the most ridiculous ease to frustrate his every move. He re-entered the hotel in a state of complete nervous depression. For the first time he had forebodings on his own account. What had happened to Mademoiselle Flossie might happen so easily to himself.

A man rose quickly from the lounge in the hotel

as he entered. Duncombe greeted him with a little expression of wonder.

"Spencer!" he exclaimed. "Were you waiting to see me?"

The journalist nodded. He was not in evening dress, and he too had the appearance of a man who has received something of a shock.

"Yes. The café is closed, I suppose. Let us go down into the smoke-room. I want to talk to you."

Duncombe led the way. They found two easy-chairs, and despatched a waiter for whiskies and soda. Then Spencer turned to his friend.

"Have you met," he asked, "with any success?"

"None!" Duncombe answered gloomily.

"I have something to tell you," Spencer continued. "No, it is not good news," he added hastily. "It is more a personal matter. It is of something which has happened to myself."

Duncombe sighed.

"Go on!" he said.

"For twenty-two and a half years," Spencer said, "I have lived in Paris as the correspondent to various English journals. I have made many friends, and it has been considered amongst all my fellow journalists that I had the ear of more influential people in politics and society here than any other writer. To-day I have resigned my position!"

Duncombe managed to summon up enough interest to be surprised.

"I had no idea," he said, "that you were contemplating anything of the sort."

"I was not!" Spencer answered grimly. "I am as much surprised myself as all my friends will be."

Duncombe was puzzled.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," he said. "You can't mean that your people ——"

"No! My people have nothing to do with it," Spencer answered. "I have had the sack, but not from them. It is Paris which will have no more of me. I live here, of course, on my faculties for obtaining information, and my *entrée* into political and social life. To-day the Minister of Police has declined to receive me, or at any future time — my cards of entry into the chamber and half a dozen places have been revoked, my name has been expunged from the visiting list of the President, and practically of every other person of importance. All that I may see of Paris now is from the outside. And there is no appeal!"

"But what is the reason of it, Spencer? What have you done? How have you offended all these people?"

Spencer hesitated.

"I don't want you to blame yourself in any way, Duncombe," he said. "You could not possibly have guessed the sort of thing you were up against. But the fact remains that my offence is in having sent my friends to the Café Montmartre on your account, and in being suspected of rendering you further assistance in your search for those two marvellous young English people!"

"You are not joking by any chance, are you?" Duncombe asked gravely.

"The matter," Spencer replied, "does not appear to me to lend itself to anything of the sort."

Duncombe buried his head in his hands for several moments.

"Great Heavens!" he murmured. "Let me think! I can't tell you how sorry I am, old chap. Can't the thing be explained? As a matter of fact, you were discretion itself."

"I don't want it explained," Spencer said, "even if it would do any good — which it would n't! I should have retired in any case in less than a year, and, as it is, I believe my successor is on his way over already. Now would you like to know why I have come here at this hour of the night to tell you this?"

Duncombe nodded.

"Go on!" he said. "Afterwards I've something to tell you."

"I've come," Spencer said, "because I'm free now, if you like, to help you. I was interested in your story before. I am ten times more interested in it now. If you still want me I'll do what I can for you."

"Want you! Spencer, do you mean it?" Duncombe exclaimed. "Want you! Why, there's no one I'd rather interest in the affair than you."

"Well, I can promise you my interest is pretty well excited already," Spencer answered. "I'm with you right along. Now tell me where you've been this evening, and what's happened."

Duncombe recounted the evening's events. His new ally listened and afterwards smoked for a moment or two in silence.

"It is simply wonderful," he declared. "The whole secret-service system of Paris is working to cover up the traces of this boy and girl. Their spies, of course, are everywhere, and their organization perfect. The first one of their creatures who tries to break away is Mademoiselle Flossie. The poor little fool lived for only

a few hours afterwards. Your bribe was high, but she ought to have known better."

"You mean ——"

"Why, of course! The theft of her poor little jewels was only a blind. It was to deceive the public, for, as a matter of fact, her murderer would have been perfectly safe if he had strolled into the nearest police station and made his report. She was killed because she was going to give you certain information."

Duncombe shuddered.

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed. "Tell me, Spencer, who or what can be at the back of all this? Guy Poynton was simply a healthy-minded, not over-intelligent, young Saxon, unambitious, and passionately fond of his home and his country life. He had no friends over here, no interests, no ties of any sort. He was abroad for the first time of his life. He regarded foreign countries and people simply with the tolerant curiosity of the untravelled Britisher. He appears in Paris for one night and disappears, and forthwith all the genius of French espionage seems to have combined to cover up his traces. It is the same with his sister, only as she came afterwards it was evidently on his account that she also is drawn into the mystery. What can be the meaning of it, Spencer?"

"My young friend," Spencer said, "I will be frank with you. I have not the least idea! I only know that somehow or other you're up against a big thing. In a week — perhaps a day — I may know more. Meanwhile I want you to go on your way precisely as though you and I had not discussed this matter."

"We may not work together then?" Duncombe asked.

"Certainly not! You are a marked man everywhere. Every door is closed to you. I shall nominally stick to my post. You must be content to be the actual looker-on, though you had better not abandon your inquiries altogether. I will put you up at the Cercle Anglais. It will serve to pass the time, and you may gain information at the most unlikely places. And now good-bye."

The liftman thrust a pencilled note into Duncombe's hand as he ascended to his room.

"From I do not know whom, Monsieur," he announced. "It was left here by some one! Whom I cannot say."

Duncombe opened it in his dressing-room. There was only one sentence: —

"Monsieur would be well advised to leave Paris to-night."

CHAPTER XI

A WORD OF WARNING

"IN the most unlikely places!" Duncombe murmured to himself as he bowed to the Frenchman, whose name his friend had mentioned. "I am very glad to meet you again, Monsieur le Baron!" he said, aloud.

They were in the covered garden at the Ritz. Duncombe had accepted the pressing invitation of an old college friend, whom he had met on the boulevards, to drop in and be introduced to his wife. And the third at the tea-table was Monsieur Louis, known in society apparently as Monsieur le Baron de Seurs.

Lady Hadley, his friend's wife, smiled languidly upon them both. She was a frail pink and white little woman, with the reputation of a beauty to sustain, wherein lay her life's work.

"You two know one another, of course!" she remarked. "Paris is no larger than London, after all."

"Sir George and I have met once at least," the Baron said, smiling. "I am glad that he does me the honor of remembering the occasion."

Duncombe felt himself no match for his companion with the foils. He let the conversation drift, and waited for his opportunity. Presently some more guests arrived, and Duncombe drew his host on one side.

"Hadley," he said, "how long have you known the Baron?"

"Met him at Dorset House about two years ago, I think," Hadley answered. "He was doing a round of country-houses. I 'm not sure that he did n't stay at Sandringham. One of the real old French families, you know, De Seurs."

Duncombe nodded. There did not seem to be much that he could say. He mingled with the other guests, and observed his social duties. But he watched the Baron, and he took care that they left together.

"Are you going my way, Baron?" he asked, as they stepped into the Place Vendôme.

"I was going to the Cercle Anglais," the Baron answered. "Do you belong?"

"I am up for a month's membership, but I am not elected yet," Duncombe answered.

"Then you shall come in as my guest," the Baron declared.

"You are exceedingly kind," Duncombe answered. "I wonder whether I might presume still further upon your good nature and ask you a question."

"The asking," the Baron murmured, "involves nothing."

"You bear, I am told, an honored name, and you are well received in society. Why do you associate with murderers and thieves in that hell of a café where I saw you first?"

The Baron smiled.

"My friend," he said, "I seek always the life amusing, and I find it there."

"I was robbed before your eyes, Baron."

The Frenchman sighed.

"I am so sorry," he said, "that I did not see it. That indeed would have been amusing."

"You know that the young lady who sat with us is dead?"

"A most bizarre happening," the Baron assented with a little sigh. "I cannot imagine how it occurred. The newspaper reports are not convincing. One would like to reconstruct the story. Poor little Flossie! She was most amusing, but just a little, a very little, too fond of flourishing her jewellery. One will miss her, though."

"Referring for one moment to our meeting at the café. You told me a story there — you and your friend Madame — of a young English lady — which the facts seem scarcely to sustain."

The Baron sighed.

"My friend," he said, "we did the best we could at a moment's notice. I rather fancied the story myself. As to facts — what have they to do with it? You demanded a story, and you got it. I rather flattered myself that under the circumstances it was not bad."

"You admit now, then, that it was not the truth!"

"The truth! My dear Sir George! Supposing that the whereabouts of your charming young friend had been known to me, do you suppose that I should have permitted myself to be bullied into disclosing it? Forgive me if I speak plainly, but if you really wished for information which you supposed that I had, your method of seeking it put you at once out of court. A French gentleman does not permit himself to be bullied."

Duncombe was silent for several moments. There were many things which he could have said, but where was the use?

"As a French gentleman, then," he said at last, "will you permit me to make a personal appeal to you? Miss Phyllis Poynton is a young lady in whom I am deeply interested. She was last seen at the Café Montmartre, from which place she disappeared. I am an Englishman of your own station. Tell me where I can find her, or what has become of her."

"My dear Sir George," the Baron said, "you might have saved yourself a great deal of trouble if you had spoken like this to me at the first. Frankly, then, I have not the least idea. Young English ladies come and go every evening at the Café Montmartre, and such places. One remembers only those who happen to have amused one, and not always those. Forgive me if I speak plainly. A young lady who had visited the Café Montmartre alone — well, you might look for her anywhere, but most assuredly in that case if your anxiety was to induce her to return to her friends, you would be a little too late. Ah! We have arrived. Now, my friend, I must make you free of the place."

Duncombe was fuming with anger, but he had discretion enough to remain silent.

"Do you play Bridge?" the Baron asked, as they entered the card-room.

"Occasionally," Duncombe assented.

"I will go and see if I can find any men," the Baron remarked. "I will leave my young friend De Bergillac to entertain you. The Vicomte de Bergillac — Sir George Duncombe."

Duncombe shook hands with a pale, weary-looking youth, whose whole appearance was distinguished by marked symptoms of lassitude and ill-health. They sat in easy-chairs almost opposite to one another,

and Duncombe found the other's scrutiny almost embarrassing.

"You speak French, perhaps — yes?" the young man asked at length.

"Yes! I speak French," Duncombe admitted.

"Then listen to me," the Vicomte said slowly. "I speak as one man of honor to another. Do not play cards in this club!"

"Not play cards? Why not?" Duncombe asked, amazed.

"You can take my advice or leave it," the Vicomte answered calmly. "I have no explanation to offer you. If you chose to repeat my remark you would place me in an exceedingly awkward position. You see, I rely upon you as a man of honor."

"I am only too much obliged to you for the hint," Duncombe declared. "But this club — the Cercle Anglais ——"

"The club is all right," the Vicomte admitted calmly. "Unfortunately there is no place in Paris which would be entirely safe for you. You have the misfortune, you see, to be in opposition to some of my friends, who have really unlimited opportunities for making things disagreeable for you. Now I am beginning to talk, and it is very foolish of me. Why don't you leave Paris, Sir George?"

"Why should I?" Duncombe asked, a little sharply. "I break no laws here, I wrong no one. I am here on my own business, and I only ask to be let alone."

The Vicomte regarded him as one might look at a spoilt child whom it was yet advisable to humor.

"Ah," he said, "they will not let you alone. You are so obstinate, like all your country-people, or you would

recognize it without my risking so much by speaking. You will have to leave Paris, and very soon. It is so easily to be managed. A dispute at cards here — you would certainly be in the wrong, and an ugly scandal if you were not away in twenty-four hours. It is one method of a thousand."

"You know so much," Duncombe said. "I have no doubt that you know the one thing which I would give years of my life to be satisfied about."

The boy's dark eyes were fixed steadily upon his.

"Sir George," he said, "there is nothing which I can possibly say to you. My warning has been exceeding foolish, but after all if I can persuade you to leave Paris I shall have done no great harm. As for the cards — well, I must plead guilty to weakness there. I have not the slightest objection to taking the life of a man who is making a nuisance of himself, but his honor I think one should not tamper with. May I offer you a cigarette? Well, Louis, what luck?"

The Baron had strolled back into the room, and was sitting on the arm of a chair.

"It will be all right directly," the Baron answered. "We have three, and old D'Arcon has telephoned that he will be here in five minutes."

Duncombe rose to his feet.

"It was really very careless of me," he said, "but I completely forgot that I had an engagement at the hotel at six o'clock. I am afraid that I shall not be able to stop."

The Baron glanced quickly at his young friend. There was nothing whatever to be learnt, though, from his pale, boyish face. His own countenance had

darkened for the moment, but he recovered his composure immediately.

"As you will," he answered carelessly. "Perhaps you can drop in later. Come and dine, will you, at half-past eight?"

"I am much obliged to you, Baron," Duncombe said, "but I cannot accept your invitation. I am a lover of plain speaking, so I will not plead a previous engagement. But the one thing I want from you, the thing which I have almost a right to demand, you will not give. I do not feel, therefore, that any more than ordinary intercourse is possible between us."

The Baron bowed gravely.

"My dear Sir George," he said, "I am answered. I wish I could drive out of your mind that extraordinary hallucination relative to my supposed knowledge of your young English friend. It is impossible! Very good! I shall look forward to a time, Sir George, when we may meet on a better footing."

Duncombe left the hotel with the recollection of that curiously ironic smile fresh in his mind.

CHAPTER XII

THE SHADOWING OF DUNCOMBE

FOR three days Duncombe saw nothing of Spencer. Three long days devoid of incident, hopelessly dull, aimless, and uninteresting. On the fourth the only change in the situation was scarcely a reassuring one. He became aware that he was being watched.

There was no particular secrecy about it. Even in the hotel itself some one was always on his heels. The absence of any attempt at concealment convinced him that it was the authorized police who had thus suddenly showed their interest in him. The suspicion was soon to be confirmed. The manager called him on the fourth morning into his private office.

"Monsieur will pardon me, I trust," he said, "if I take the liberty of asking him a question."

"Certainly!" Duncombe answered. "Go ahead!"

"Monsieur is aware that he has been placed under the surveillance of the police?"

"The fact," Duncombe said, "has been borne in upon me during the last few hours. What of it?"

The manager coughed.

"This is a cosmopolitan hotel, Sir George," he said, "and we make no pretence at ultra-exclusiveness, but we do not care to see the police on the premises."

"Neither do I," Duncombe answered. "Can you suggest how we may get rid of them?"

"Monsieur does not quite understand," the manager

said smoothly. "Clearly he has done something to bring him under the suspicion of the law. Under these circumstances it would be more agreeable to the management of the hotel if Monsieur would depart."

Duncombe did not wish to depart. The hotel at which Phyllis Poynton's trunks were still awaiting her return was the hotel at which he wished to stay.

"Look here, Monsieur Huber," he said. "I give you my word of honor that I have broken no law, nor engaged in any criminal action whatever since I came to Paris. This game of having me watched is simply a piece of bluff. I have done nothing except make inquiries in different quarters respecting those two young English people who are still missing. In doing this I seem to have run up against what is nothing more nor less than a disgraceful conspiracy. Every hand is against me. Instead of helping me to discover them, the police seem only anxious to cover up the tracks of those young people."

The manager looked down at his desk.

"We hotel-keepers," he said, "are very much in the hands of the police. We cannot judge between them and the people whom they treat as suspected persons. I know very well, Sir George, that you are a person of respectability and character, but if the police choose to think otherwise I must adapt my views to theirs. I am sorry, but we must really ask you to leave."

Sir George turned on his heel."

"Very good!" he said. "I will go and take rooms elsewhere."

He left the hotel, and walked towards the Ritz. At the corner of the Place Vendôme an automobile was pulled up with a jerk within a few feet of him. A

tired-looking boy leaned over wearily towards him from the front seat.

"Sir George," he said, "can you give me five minutes?"

"With pleasure!" he answered. "I was going into the Ritz. Come and have something."

"To Maxim's, if you don't mind," the Vicomte said. "It will take us only a moment."

Sir George stepped in. The Vicomte, in whose fingers the wheel seemed scarcely to rest, so light and apparently careless was his touch, touched a lever by his side, released the clutch, and swung the great car round the corner at a speed which made Duncombe grasp the sides. At a pace which seemed to him most ridiculous, they dashed into the Rue de Rivoli, and with another sharp turn pulled up before Maxim's. The Vicomte rose with a yawn as though he had just awoke from a refreshing dream. His servant slipped off his fur coat, and he descended to the pavement faultlessly dressed and quite unruffled. The commissionaire preceded them, hat in hand, to the door. A couple of waiters ushered them to the table which the Vicomte intimated by a gesture.

"I myself," he remarked, drawing off his gloves, "take nothing but absinthe. What may I have the pleasure of ordering for you?"

Duncombe ordered a whisky and soda.

"I think," he said, "there is one thing which I ought to tell you at once. I am being shadowed by the police. The man who has just arrived, and who seems a little breathless, is, I believe, the person whose duty it is to dog my footsteps in the daytime."

"What a pity!" the Vicomte murmured. "I would at

least have taken you a mile or so round the boulevards if I had known. But wait! You are sure — that it is the police by whom you are being watched?"

"Quite," Duncombe answered. "The manager of the hotel has spoken to me about it. He has asked me, in fact, to leave."

"To leave the hotel?"

"Yes! I was on my way to the Ritz to secure rooms when I met you."

The Vicomte sipped his absinthe gravely.

"I should not take those rooms," he said. "You will in all probability not occupy them."

"Why not?"

"It has been decided," the Vicomte said, "that you are to be driven out of Paris. In the end you will have to go. I think if I were you I would not wait. The train de luxe to Calais is more comfortable than a wet bench in the Morgue or a French prison."

"Who has decided this?" Duncombe asked. "What Emperor has signed the decree of my banishment?"

"There have been worse served Emperors," the Vicomte remarked, "than the, shall we say person, who bids you go!"

"What is my offence?" Duncombe asked.

"I know nothing," the Vicomte answered slowly, pouring himself out some absinthe.

"Who are my judges, then? What secret authorities have I incensed? I am an honest man, engaged in an honest mission. Why should I not be allowed to execute it?"

The Vicomte half closed his eyes. Duncombe was a little angry. The Vicomte regarded him with reproachful wonder.

"You ask me so many questions," he murmured, "and I tell you that I know nothing. I have asked you to come here with me because I had just this to say. I can answer no questions, offer no explanations. I have no particular liking for you, but I am afflicted with a cursedly sensitive disposition, and — there are things which I find it hard to watch with equanimity. There is a train for England at nine o'clock this evening, Sir George. Take it!"

Duncombe rose from his seat.

"I am very much obliged to you," he said. "I believe that you are giving me what you believe to be good advice. Whether I can follow it or not is a different matter."

The Vicomte sighed.

"You Englishmen," he said, "are so obstinate. It is the anxiety concerning your friends, I suppose, which keeps you here?"

"Yes!"

The Vicomte hesitated. He looked up and down the room, and especially at the man whom Duncombe had pointed out to him. He had edged nearer and nearer till he was almost within earshot. The Vicomte's voice, always low, became a whisper.

"I can tell you this much, at any rate," he said. "Whatever their present condition may be, it is more likely to be improved than made worse by your departure. You are a well-meaning person, Monsieur, but you do nobody any good here, and you risk — more than I dare tell you."

The Vicomte turned away to greet a little party of friends who had just entered. Duncombe strolled back to the hotel, and found Spencer walking restlessly up and down the hall waiting for him.

"At last!" he exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. "Come up into my room, Spencer. We can talk there."

He rang for the lift, and as they ascended he watched the other anxiously. Spencer was looking pale and disturbed. His eyes showed signs of sleeplessness, and he had not the air of a man who has good news to impart. As soon as they were inside the room he locked the door.

"Duncombe," he said, "there is a train which leaves Paris for London at four o'clock. You must catch it — if you are allowed to. Don't look like that, man. I tell you you've got to do it. If you are in Paris to-night you will be in prison."

"For what offence?" Duncombe asked.

"For the murder of Mademoiselle Flossie. They are training the witnesses now. The whole thing is as easy as A B C. They can prove you so guilty that not even your best friend would doubt it. Pack your clothes, man, or ring for the valet."

Duncombe hesitated, but he, too, was pale.

"Are you serious, Spencer?" he asked.

"I am so serious," Spencer answered, "that unless you obey me I will not move another finger in this matter. You lose nothing by going. All that a human being can do I will do! But you lose your life, or, at any rate, your liberty if you stay."

Duncombe bowed his head to fate.

"Very well!" he said. "I will go!"

CHAPTER XIII

"HER VOICE."

"YOU have heard now," Duncombe said, finally, "the whole history of my wanderings. I feel like a man who has been beating the air, who has been at war with unseen and irresistible forces. I never seemed to have a chance. In plain words, I have failed utterly!"

The two men were sitting in a room impossible of classification. It might have been a study, smoking-room, or gun-room. The walls were adorned with stags' heads and various trophies of the chase. There were guns and rifles in plenty in a rack by the chimney-piece, a row of bookcases along the north wall, golf clubs, cricket bats, and foils everywhere. A pile of logs ready for burning stood in the open grate, and magnificent rugs were spread about the floor. Nowhere was there the slightest trace of a woman's presence, for Duncombe had no sisters, and his was entirely a bachelor household.

Duncombe himself and Andrew Pelham were seated in great easy-chairs in front of the open window. It was his first fine evening at home, and he was drinking in great draughts of the fresh pure air, fragrant with the perfume of roses and huge clusters of wallflowers. Paris had seemed to him like a great oven. All the time he had been half stifled, and yet he knew very well that at a word from Spencer he would have re-

turned there at an hour's notice. He knew, too, that the home which he had loved all his days could never be quite the same place to him again.

Andrew roused himself from rather a prolonged silence.

"You were a brick to go, George," he said. "It is more than any one else in the world would have done for me."

Duncombe laughed a little uneasily. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and refilled it slowly.

"Andrew," he said, "I don't want to seem a fraud. I dare say that I might have gone for you alone — but I did n't."

His friend smiled faintly.

"Ah!" he remarked. "I had forgotten your little infatuation. It has n't worn off yet, then?"

"No, nor any signs of it," Duncombe answered bluntly. "It 's an odd position for a matter-of-fact person like myself, is n't it? I tell you, Andrew, I 've really tried to care for some of the girls about here. The place wants a mistress, and I 'm the tenth baronet in the direct line. One 's got to think about these things, you know. I 've tried hard, and I 've never even come near it."

"It will wear off," Andrew said. "It is a very charming little fancy, a most delightful bit of sentiment, George, but with nothing behind it it can't last."

"Perhaps not," Duncombe answered quietly. "All that I know is that it has shown no signs of wearing off up to now. It was in Paris exactly as it is here. And I know very well that if I thought it would do her the least bit of good I would start back to Paris or to the end of the world to-night."

"I must readjust my views of you, George," his friend said with mild satire. "I always looked upon you as fair game for the Norfolk dowagers with their broods of daughters, but I never contemplated your fixing your affections upon a little piece of pasteboard."

"Rot! It is the girl herself," Duncombe declared.

"But you have never seen her."

Duncombe shrugged his shoulders. He said nothing. What was the use? Never seen her! Had she not found her way into every beautiful place his life had knowledge of?

"If you had," Andrew murmured — "ah, well, the picture is like her. I remember when she was a child. She was always fascinating, always delightful to watch."

Duncombe looked out upon the gardens which he loved, and sighed.

"If only Spencer would send for me to go back to Paris," he said with a sigh.

Andrew turned his head.

"You can imagine now," he said, "what I have been suffering. The desire for action sometimes is almost maddening. I think that the man who sits and waits has the hardest task."

They were silent for some time, smoking steadily. Then Duncombe reverted once more to his wanderings.

"You remember the story they told me at the Café, Andrew," he said. "It was a lie, of course, but was Miss Poynton anything of an artist?"

"To the best of my belief," Andrew answered, "she has never touched a brush or a pencil since she left school."

Duncombe looked out into the gathering twilight.

"It is a devil's riddle, this!" he said slowly. "Why did she go to that place at all?"

"God only knows!" Andrew murmured.

Duncombe's teeth were hard set. A paper-knife, which he had caught up from the table, snapped in his fingers. There was something in his throat which nearly choked him.

"Phyllis Poynton," Andrew continued, "was as sweet and pure a woman as ever breathed. She must have loathed that place. She could only have gone there to seek for her brother, or ——"

"Or for whom?"

"For those who knew where he was."

Duncombe turned his head.

"Andrew!"

"Yes, old chap!"

"Let me look at her photograph again."

Andrew drew it from his pocket and passed it over. Duncombe studied it for several moments under the lamplight.

"You are right, Andrew," he said slowly. "For her the other things would not be possible. I wonder ——"

His fingers clung to the photograph. He looked across at his friend. There was a slight flush in his face. He spoke nervously.

"Andrew," he said, "I'm afraid it sounds a bit brutal, but — this photograph is no use to you just now, is it, until your eyes get better. Will you lend it me?"

"I could n't," Andrew answered quietly. "I can't see it now of course, but I like to feel it in my pocket, and it will be the first thing I shall look at when the

doctor lets me take off these beastly glasses — if ever he does. Until then — well, I like to feel I've got it. That's all!"

They both smoked furiously for several moments without looking at one another. Duncombe spoke first.

"Andrew!"

"Well?"

"If she comes back — shall you ever ask her to marry you?"

"I don't know, George. I'm poor, and I'm twelve years older than she is. I don't know."

There was another silence. Then the conversation drifted back once more to the one subject which was monopolizing the thought of both of them.

"I tell you what seems to me to be the most extraordinary part of the whole business," Duncombe said. "First the brother disappears. Then without a word to any one the sister also rushes off to Paris, and vanishes from the face of the earth after a series of extraordinary proceedings. One supposes naturally that if they have come to harm anywhere — if there has been a crime — there must have been a motive. What is it? You say that their banking account has been undisturbed?"

"It was last week. I should hear if any cheques were presented."

"And the boy's letter of credit even has never been drawn upon!"

"No! Not since he left Vienna."

"Then the motive cannot be robbery. Thank Heaven," Duncombe added, with a little shudder, "that it was the boy who went first."

"Don't!"

A great winged insect came buzzing into the room. Duncombe struck viciously at it with the palm of his hand.

"Lord!" he muttered, "what a fool I am! I've never been away from home before, Andrew, without longing to get back, and here I am, just back from Paris in August, from turning night into day, from living just the sort of life I hate, and I'd give anything to be going back there to-morrow. I'm a haunted man, Andrew. I got up last night simply because I could n't sleep, and walked down as far as the paddock. I seemed to see her face in all the shadowy corners, to see her moving towards me from amongst the trees. And I'm not an imaginative person, Andrew, and I've got no nerves. Look!"

He held out his hand, strong and firm and brown. It was as steady as a rock.

"I can't sleep," he continued, "I can't rest. Is there witchcraft in this thing, Andrew?"

Andrew Pelham laughed shortly. It was a laugh which had no kinship to mirth.

"And I," he said, "have seen her grow up. We were boy and girl together. I stole apples for her. I have watched her grow from girlhood into womanhood. I have known flesh and blood, and you a cardboard image. I too am a strong man, and I am helpless. I lie awake at night and I think. It is as though the red flames of hell were curling up around me. George, if she has come to any evil, whether I am blind or whether I can see, I'll grope my way from country to country till my hand is upon the throat of the beast who has harmed her."

The man's voice shook with passion. Duncombe was

awed into silence. He had known Andrew Pelham always as a good-natured, good-hearted giant, beloved of children and animals, deeply religious, a man whose temper, if he possessed such a thing, was always strictly under control. Such an outburst as this was a revelation. Duncombe understood then how slight a thing his own suffering was.

"You shall not go alone, Andrew," he said softly. "But for the present we must wait. If any one can help us, Spencer will."

A servant came in with the whisky and glasses, and silently arranged them upon the table. Duncombe rose and attended to his duties as host.

"Can I get you anything further, sir?" the man asked.

"Nothing, thanks," Duncombe answered. "Tell the servants to go to bed. We will lock up. Say when, Andrew!"

Andrew took his glass mechanically. Out in the lane the silence of the summer night was suddenly broken by the regular tread of horses' feet and the rumbling of vehicles. Duncombe Hall was built like many of the old-fashioned houses in the country, with its back to the road, and the window at which they were sitting looked out upon it. Duncombe leaned forward in his chair.

"Visitors by the last train going up to Runton Place," he remarked. "Runton has quite a large party for the first. Hullo! They 're stopping. I 'd better go out."

He rose from his chair. The omnibus had stopped in the lane, and they could hear the voices of the occupants clearly through the soft darkness. Some one was apparently getting out, and stumbled. A girl's soft

laugh rang out distinctly above the man's exclamation. Duncombe was already stepping over the window-sill when he felt a clutch like iron upon his shoulder. He looked round in amazement. Andrew's face was transformed. He was struggling for words.

"Her voice!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Am I dreaming, George? It was her voice!"

CHAPTER XIV

LAUGHTER OF WOMEN

THE door of the omnibus was opened as Duncombe stepped over the low wall into the road. A tall man in a long light Inverness descended.

"Hullo, Duncombe!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand; "I was coming in to see you for a moment."

"Good man!" Duncombe answered. "Bring your friends, won't you?"

He held open the gate hospitably, but Lord Runton shook his head.

"I only wanted a word with you," he said. "We're all starving, and if you don't mind we'll get on as quickly as we can. About to-morrow. You shoot with us, of course?"

"Delighted!" Duncombe answered.

"Cresswell met me at the station," Lord Runton continued. "I'd drawn out a plan for the shoot, but it seems that Cresswell — old fool — has n't got his harvest in from the two fields by Ketton's Gorse. What I wanted to ask you was if we might take your turnips up from Mile's bottom to the north end of the gorse. We can make our circuit then without a break."

"My dear fellow!" Duncombe protested, "was it worth while asking me such a thing? Of course you can."

"That's settled, then," Lord Runton declared, turning back towards the omnibus. "Let me introduce you to

my friends," he added, resting his hand upon the other's shoulder, "and then we 'll be off."

Duncombe, in whose ears his friend's cry was still ringing, pressed eagerly forward.

"This is my neighbor, Sir George Duncombe," Lord Runton said, looking into the carriage, "who will shoot with us to-morrow. Miss Fielding and Mr. Fielding, Lady Angrave and the Baron Von Rothe."

Lady Angrave held out her hand.

"Sir George and I are almost old friends," she said, with a somewhat languid smile. "We were both at Castle Holkham last autumn."

Duncombe murmured something conventional as he bowed over her fingers. His whole attention was riveted upon the tall, pale girl in the further corner of the omnibus. Her acknowledgment of his introduction had been of the slightest, and her features were obscured by a white veil. She looked away from him at once and continued a whispered conversation with the white-haired gentleman at her side. Duncombe could think of no excuse for addressing her.

"I shall have the pleasure of meeting you all again to-morrow," he said, closing the door after Lord Runton. "I won't keep you now. I know what the journey is down from town. Good night, Runton!"

"Good night, George. Ten o'clock sharp!"

The carriage rolled off, and Duncombe returned to his own domain. Andrew was waiting for him impatiently by the gate.

"Well!" he exclaimed eagerly, "you have seen her. Well?"

The man was trembling with excitement. There were drops of perspiration upon his forehead. His voice sounded unnatural.

"I saw a young lady in the carriage," Duncombe answered, "or rather I did not see her, for she wore a veil, and she scarcely looked at me. But she was introduced to me as Miss Fielding, and her father was with her."

"Fielding! Fielding!" Andrew repeated. "Never mind that. What was she like! What colored hair had she?"

"I told you that she kept her veil down," Duncombe repeated. "Her hair was a sort of deep red-brown — what I could see of it. But, seriously, Andrew, what is the use of discussing her? One might as soon expect one of my housemaids to change into Phyllis Poynton, as to discover her with a brand-new father, a brand-new name, and a guest at Runton Place."

Andrew was silent for a moment. He touched his spectacles with a weary gesture, and covered his eyes with his hand.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you are right. I suppose I am a fool. But — the voice!"

"The laughter of women," said Duncombe, "is music all the world over. One cannot differ very much from the other."

"You are quite wrong, George," Andrew said. "The voices of women vary like the thumb-marks of criminals. There are no two attuned exactly alike. It is the receptive organs that are at fault. We, who have lost one sense, find the others a little keener. The laughter of that girl — George, will you keep me a few days longer? Somehow I cannot bring myself to leave until I have heard her voice once more."

Duncombe laughed heartily.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I shall bless your uncommonly sensitive ears if they keep you here with me even for an extra few days. You shall have your opportunity, too. I always dine at Runton Place after our first shoot, and I know Runton quite well enough to take you. You shall sit at the same table. Hullo, what's this light wobbling up the drive?"

He strolled a yard or so away, and returned.

"A bicycle," he remarked. "One of the grooms has been down to the village. I shall have to speak to Burdett in the morning. I will not have these fellows coming home at all sorts of times in the morning. Come along in, Andrew. Just a drain, eh? And a cigarette — and then to bed. Runton's keen on his bag, and they say that German, Von Rothe, is a fine shot. Can't let them have it all their own way."

"No fear of that," Andrew answered, stepping through the window. "I'll have the cigarette, please, but I don't care about any more whisky. The 'Field' mentioned your name only a few weeks ago as one of the finest shots at rising birds in the country, so I don't think you need fear the German."

"I ought to hold my own with the partridges," Duncombe admitted, helping himself from the siphon, "but come in, come in!"

A servant entered with a telegram upon a silver salver.

"A boy has just brought this from Runton, sir," he said.

Duncombe tore it open. He was expecting a message from his gun-maker, and he opened it without any particular interest, but as he read, his whole manner

changed. He held the sheet in front of him long enough to have read it a dozen times. He could not restrain the slight start — a half exclamation. Then his teeth came together. He remembered the servant and looked up.

"There will be no answer to-night, Murray," he said. "Give the boy a shilling and some supper. If he goes home by the Runton gates, tell him to be sure and close them, because of the deer."

"Very good, sir!"

The man departed. Duncombe laid the telegram upon the table. He felt that Andrew was waiting impatiently for him to speak.

"Well?"

"The telegram is from Spencer," Duncombe said.

"From Paris?"

"Yes."

"He has discovered something?"

"On the contrary," Duncombe answered, "he is asking me for information, and very curious information, too."

"What does he want to know?"

"The telegram," Duncombe said slowly, "is in French. He asks me to wire him at once the names of all the guests at Runton Place."

Andrew struck the table a mighty blow with his clenched fist.

"I knew it!" he cried. "It was her laugh, her voice. Phyllis Poynton is there!"

Duncombe looked at his friend incredulously.

"My dear Andrew," he said, "be reasonable. The young lady and her father in that omnibus were introduced to me by Runton himself as Mr. and Miss Fielding.

They are going to his house as his guests. Naturally, therefore, he knows all about them. Miss Poynton, as you have told me more than once, is an orphan."

"Common-sense won't even admit it as a matter of argument," Andrew said. "I know that quite well. But how do you account for Spencer's telegram?"

"Remember that he is a newspaper correspondent," Duncombe said. "He has many interests and many friends with whom he is constantly exchanging information. It is a coincidence, I admit. But the wildest flight of imagination could not make any more of it."

"You must be right," Andrew said quietly. "It all sounds, and is, so convincing. But I wish that I had not heard that laugh!"

CHAPTER XV

MISS FIELDING FROM AMERICA

DUNCOMBE leaned his gun up against a gate. A few yards away his host was talking to the servants who had brought down luncheon. The rest of the party were only just in sight a field or two off.

"Have a glass of sherry before lunch, George?" his host asked, strolling towards him.

"Nothing to drink, thanks! I'd like a cigarette, if you have one."

Lord Runton produced his case, and a servant brought them matches. They both leaned over the gate, and watched the scattered little party slowly coming towards them.

"Who is your friend Fielding?" Duncombe asked, a little bluntly,

"Fellow from New York," Lord Runton answered. "He's been very decent to my brother out there, and Archibald wrote and asked me to do all we could for them. The girl is very handsome. You'll see her at dinner to-night."

"Here for long?"

"No, unfortunately," Lord Runton answered. "I had very hard work to get them to come at all. Cicely has written them three or four times, I think, but

they 've always had engagements. They 're only staying till Monday, I think. Very quiet, inoffensive sort of chap, Fielding, but the girl 's a ripper! Hullo! Here they are. I 'll introduce you."

A groom had thrown open the gate of the field across which they were looking, and Lady Runton from the box seat of a small mail phaeton waved her whip. She drove straight across the furrows towards them a little recklessly, the groom running behind. By her side was a girl with coils of deep brown hair, and a thick black veil worn after the fashion of the travelling American.

"Just in time, are n't we?" Lady Runton remarked, as she brought the horses to a standstill. "Help me down, Jack, and look after Miss Fielding, Sir George. By the bye, have you two met yet?"

Duncombe bowed — he was bareheaded — and held out his hands.

"I saw Miss Fielding for a moment last night," he said, "or rather I did n't see her. We were introduced, however. What do you think of our maligned English weather, Miss Fielding?" he asked.

She raised her veil and looked at him deliberately. He had been prepared for this meeting, and yet it was with difficulty that he refrained from a start. The likeness of the photograph (it was even at that moment in his pocket) was wonderful. She looked a little older, perhaps. There were shadows in her face of which there were no traces in the picture. And yet the likeness was wonderful.

"To-day at least is charming," she said. "But then I am quite used to your climate, you know. I have lived in Europe almost as much as in America."

She certainly had no trace of any accent. She spoke a little more slowly, perhaps, than most young Englishwomen, but there was nothing whatever in her words or in her pronunciation of them to suggest a transatlantic origin. She stood by his side looking about her with an air of interest, and Duncombe began to wonder whether after all she was not more beautiful than the photograph which he had treasured so jealously. He became conscious of a desire to keep her by his side.

"Is your father shooting, Miss Fielding?"

She laughed softly.

"You don't know my father, Sir George," she answered. "He hates exercise, detests being out of doors, and his idea of Paradise when he is away from business is to be in a large hotel where every one speaks English, where there are tapes and special editions and an American bar."

Duncombe laughed.

"Then I am afraid Mr. Fielding will find it rather hard to amuse himself down here."

"Well, he's discovered the telephone," she said. "He's spending the morning ringing up people all over the country. He was talking to his bankers when we came out. Oh, here come the rest of them. How tired they look, poor things — especially the Baron! Nature never meant him to tramp over ploughed fields, I am sure. Baron, I was just saying how warm you look."

The Baron took off his cap, gave up his gun to a keeper, and turned a glowing face towards them.

"My dear young lady," he declared, "I am warm. I admit it, but it is good for me. Very good indeed.

I tried to make your father walk with us. He will be sure to suffer some day if he takes no exercise."

"Oh, father's never ill," the girl answered. "But then he eats nothing, Sir George, I hope you're going to devote yourself to me at luncheon. I'm terribly hungry."

"So we all are," Lady Runton declared. "Come along, every one."

Luncheon was served in a large open barn, pleasantly fragrant of dried hay, and with a delightful view of the sea far away in the distance. Miss Fielding chattered to every one, was amusing and amused. The Baron gave her as much of his attention as he was ever disposed to bestow upon any one at meal-times, and Duncombe almost forgot that he had breakfasted at eight o'clock.

"Charming young person, that!" said Lady Runton's neighbor to her. "One of our future Duchesses, I suppose?"

Lady Runton smiled.

"Lots of money, Teddy," she answered. "What a pity you haven't a title!"

The young man — he was in the Foreign Office — sighed, and shook his head.

"Such things are not for me," he declared sententiously. "My affections are engaged."

"That isn't the least reason why you shouldn't marry money," her ladyship declared, lighting a cigarette. "Go and talk to her!"

"Can't spoil sport!" he answered, shaking his head. "By Jove! Duncombe is making the running, though, isn't he?"

Her ladyship raised her glasses. Duncombe and

Miss Fielding had strolled outside the barn. He was showing her his house — a very picturesque old place it looked, down in the valley.

"It 's nothing but a farmhouse, of course," he said. "No pretensions to architecture or anything of that sort, of course, but it 's rather a comfortable old place."

"I think it is perfectly charming," the girl said. "Do you live there all alone? You have sisters perhaps?"

He shook his head.

"No such luck!" he answered. "Mine is entirely a bachelor establishment. A great part of the time I am alone. Just now I have a pal staying with me — awfully decent chap, from Devonshire."

She was certainly silent for a moment. He fancied too that there was a change in her face.

"From Devonshire!" she repeated, with a carelessness which, if it was not natural, was exceedingly well assumed. "I believe I knew some people once who came from there. What is your friend's name, Sir George?"

He turned slowly towards her.

"Andrew Pelham!" he said quietly. "He comes from a place called Raynesworth."

"He is staying here now — with you?"

"Yes," he answered gravely.

It was not his fancy this time. Of that he felt sure. Her face for the moment had been the color of chalk — a little exclamation had been strangled upon her lips. She shot a quick glance at him. He met it steadily.

"You know the name?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"The name — yes," she answered, "but not the

person. A very old friend of mine was called Andrew Pelham, but he was an American, and he has never been in England. It startled me, though, to hear the exact name from you."

She was herself again. Her explanation was carelessly given. It sounded even convincing, but Duncombe himself was not convinced. He knew that she wanted him to be. He felt her eyes seeking his, studying his face. Perhaps she was only anxious that he should not misunderstand.

"George, are you ready?" his host called out. "We're going to take Smith's pastures."

"Quite!" Duncombe answered. "Until this evening, Miss Fielding."

"You are dining at Runton Place?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," he answered. "Will you tell me all about your Andrew Pelham?"

She raised her eyes to his and smiled.

"Do you think that you would be interested?" she asked.

"You know that I should," he answered quietly.

For a time he shot badly. Then he felt that his host's eye was upon him, and pulled himself together. But he was never at his best. He felt that the whole world of his sensations had been suddenly disturbed. It was impossible that there could be any connection between this girl and the photograph which had first fired him with the impulse to undertake that most extraordinary and quixotic mission. Yet the fact remained that the girl herself had had very much the same effect upon him as his first sight of the photograph. It was a coincidence, of course. Miss Fielding

was charming. There was no reason why he should not indulge to the full his admiration of her. She had affected him in a most curious manner. Another man would have declared himself in love with her. It was not possible that she could be any one but Miss Fielding. That start which he had fancied that he had noticed, the sudden aging of her face, the look almost of fear! Absurd! He was losing his nerves. It was not possible, he told himself steadfastly. And yet——

Some of the women were following them in a leisurely sort of way behind. Miss Fielding was there, walking a little apart. She carried her hat in her hand. The wind, which was blowing the skirts of her white cloth dress about her, was making havoc in her glorious hair. She walked with her head thrown back, with all the effortless grace of youth — a light heart, an easy conscience. He deliberately left his place and walked back to meet her. She waved her hand gayly. There was color in her cheeks now, and her eyes laughed into his. The shadows were gone. He felt that this was madness, and yet he said what he had come back to say.

"I thought that you might be interested to know, Miss Fielding, that you will meet the gentleman — with the same name as your friend — this evening. Lord Runton has been good enough to ask him to come up and dine."

She nodded gayly.

"What a crowd of sentimental memories his coming will evoke!" she declared. "Be nice to me, won't you, and help me dispel them?"

"Perhaps," he said, smiling with a great relief; "I might prefer to try to construct a few on my own account."

"Go and do your duty," she commanded, laughing.

Duncombe hastened to his place. His eyes were bright. He felt that he was walking upon air.

"What a double distilled ass I nearly made of myself!" he muttered.

"'Go and do your duty,' she commanded."

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CHAPTER XVI

MISS FIELDING ASKS A QUESTION

SHE came into the room a little late, and her entrance created almost a sensation. Duncombe only knew that she wore a black gown and looked divine. Lady Runton murmured "Paquin" with a sigh and frown.

"These girls might at least leave us black," she murmured to her neighbor. "What pearls!"

Duncombe stepped forward to meet her. He could not keep the admiration from his eyes. Her shoulders and slim graceful neck were as white as alabaster, her hair was a gorgeous brown kissed into fine gold glimmering as though with a touch of some hidden fire. She moved with the delightful freedom of absolute naturalness. He murmured something which sounded ridiculously commonplace, and she laughed at him.

"Do you know that you are going to take me in?" she said. "I hope that you are prepared to be very amusing. Do tell me which is your friend."

Then Duncombe remembered Andrew, who was standing by his side. He turned towards him, and the words suddenly died away upon his lips. Andrew's tall frame was shaking as though with some powerful emotion. He was standing with his head thrust forward as though listening intently. Duncombe set his teeth.

"Will you allow me to present my friend Miss Fielding?" he said. "Andrew, this is Miss Fielding. Mr. Pelham, Miss Fielding."

She held out her hand and took his passive fingers.

"I am so glad to know you, Mr. Pelham," she said pleasantly. "Sir George gave me quite a shock to-day when he spoke of you. I was once very nearly engaged to an Andrew Pelham in Baltimore, and I had most distressing visions of all my old sweethearts turning up to spoil my good time here."

Andrew's voice sounded odd and restrained.

"I have never been in America," he said.

She laughed.

"You need not be afraid that I am going to claim you," she declared. "You are at least a foot taller than my Andrew. You don't even inspire me with any tender recollections of him. Baron, I do hope that you have not taken too much exercise."

"My dear young lady," he answered, bowing, "I never felt better in my life! Be thankful that it is not your hard fate to be my dinner companion. I am so hungry I should have no time for conversation."

"On the contrary," she declared, "I — almost regret it! I much prefer to do some of the talking myself, but I seldom get a chance. Will you promise to give me a show to-night, Sir George?"

"As long as you permit me to say two or three things which are in my mind," he answered, lowering his voice a little, "you may do all the rest of the talking."

"Dear me, I am curious already," she exclaimed. "What are the two or three things, Sir George? Why! Do you see — nearly every one has gone," she added suddenly. "Come along!"

She laid her hand upon his arm and led him away. Soon he was by her side at the table. Their companions were uninteresting. Andrew was out of sight. Duncombe forgot everything else in the world except that he was with her.

Their conversation was of trifles, yet intimate trifles. The general talk buzzed all round them. Neither made any effort to arrest it. To Duncombe she seemed simply the image he had created and worshipped suddenly come to life. That it was not in fact her picture went for nothing. There was no infidelity. The girl who had existed in his dreams was here. It was for her that he had departed from the even tenor of his ways, for her he had searched in Paris, for her he had braved the horrors of that unhappy week. Already he felt that she belonged to him, and in a vague sort of way she, too, seemed to be letting herself drift, to be giving color to his unconscious assumption by her lowered tone, by the light in her eyes which answered his, by all those little nameless trifles which go to the sealing of unwritten compacts.

Once her manner changed. Her father, who was on the opposite side of the table a little way off, leaned forward and addressed her.

"Say, Sybil, where did we stay in Paris? I've forgotten the name of the place."

"L'hôtel d'Athènes," she answered, and at once resumed her conversation with Duncombe.

But somehow the thread was broken. Duncombe found himself watching the little gray man opposite, who ate and drank so sparingly, who talked only when he was spoken to, and yet who seemed to be taking a keen but covert interest in everything that went on

about him. Her father! There was no likeness, no shadow of a likeness. Yet Duncombe felt almost a personal interest in him. They would know one another better some day, he felt.

"So you 've been in Paris lately?" he asked her suddenly.

She nodded.

"For a few days."

"I arrived from there barely a week ago," he remarked.

"I hate the place!" she answered. "Talk of something else."

And he obeyed.

The second interruption came from Andrew. During a momentary lull in the conversation they heard his firm clear voice talking.

"My time was up yesterday, but I find so much to interest me down here that I think I shall stay on for a few more days, if my host remains as hospitable as ever."

"So much to interest him," she murmured. "Are not all places the same to the blind? What does he mean?"

"He is not really blind!" Duncombe answered, lowering his voice. "He can see things very dimly. The doctor has told him that if he wears those glasses for a few more months he may be able to preserve some measure of eyesight. Poor chap!"

"He does not attract me — your friend," she said a little coldly. "What can he find to interest him so much here? Do you see how he keeps his head turned this way? It is almost as though he wished to listen to what we were saying."

"There is a sort of reason for that," Duncombe answered. "Shall I explain it?"

"Do!"

"Pelham lives, as I think I told you, in a small country-house near Raynesworth," Duncombe began. "The hall in his village was occupied by a young man — a boy, really — and his sister. Early in the year the boy, who had never been abroad, thought that he would like to travel a little in Europe. He wandered about some time in Germany and Austria, and was coming home by Paris. Suddenly all letters from him ceased. He did not return. He did not write. He drew no money from his letter of credit. He simply disappeared."

The girl was proceeding tranquilly with her dinner. The story so far did not seem to interest her.

"His sister, who went over to Paris to meet him, found herself quite alone there, and we supposed that she devoted herself to searching for him. And then curiously enough she, too, disappeared. Letters from her suddenly ceased. No one knew what had become of her."

She looked at him with a faint smile.

"Now," she said, "your story is becoming interesting. Do go on. I want to know where you and Mr. Pelham come in."

"Pelham, I think," he continued gravely, "was their oldest friend. He sent for me. We were old college chums, and I went. This trouble with his eyes had only just come on, and he was practically helpless — much more helpless than the ordinary blind person, because it was all new to him. This boy and girl were his old and dear friends. He was longing to

be off to Paris to search for them himself, and yet he knew that so far as he was concerned it would be simply wasted time. He showed me the girl's photograph."

"Well?"

"I went in his place."

"And did you find either of them?"

"No."

"I wonder," she said, "why you have told me this story?"

"I am going to tell you why," he answered. "Because when Pelham heard you laugh last night he was like a madman. He believed that it was the voice of Phyllis Poynton. And I — I — when I saw you, I also felt that miracles were at hand. Look here!"

He drew a photograph from his pocket and showed it to her. She looked at it long and earnestly.

"Yes," she admitted, "there is a likeness. It is like what I might have been years ago. But will you tell me something?"

"Of course!"

"Why do you carry the picture of that girl about with you?"

He leaned towards her, and at that moment Lady Runton rose from her place.

"In the winter garden afterwards," he whispered. "You have asked me the very question that I wanted to answer!"

CHAPTER XVII

GEORGE DUNCOMBE'S LIE

THERE was something strange about Andrew's manner as he moved up to Duncombe's side. The latter, who was in curiously high spirits, talked incessantly for several minutes. Then he came to a dead stop. He was aware that his friend was not listening.

"What is the matter with you, old chap?" he asked abruptly. "You are positively glum."

Andrew Pelham shook his head.

"Nothing much!" he said.

"Rubbish! What is it?"

Andrew dropped his voice almost to a whisper. The words came hoarsely. He seemed scarcely master of himself.

"The girl's voice tortures me," he declared. "It does n't seem possible that there can be two so much alike. And then Spencer's telegram. What does it mean?"

"Be reasonable, old fellow!" Duncombe answered. "You knew Phyllis Poynton well. Do you believe that she would be content to masquerade under a false name, invent a father, be received here — Heaven knows how — and meet you, an old friend, as a stranger? The thing 's absurd, is n't it?"

"Granted. But what about Spencer's telegram?"

"It is an enigma, of course. We can only wait for his solution. I have wired him the information he asked for. In the meantime——"

"Well, in the meantime?"

"There is nothing to be gained by framing absurd hypotheses. I don't mind telling you, Andrew, that I find Miss Fielding the most delightful girl I ever met in my life."

"Tell me exactly, George, how she compares with the photograph you have of Phyllis Poynton."

Duncombe sipped his wine slowly.

"She is very like it," he said, "and yet there are differences. She is certainly a little thinner and taller. The features are similar, but the hair is quite differently arranged. I should say that Miss Fielding is two or three years older than Phyllis Poynton, and she has the air of having travelled and been about more."

"A few months of events," Andrew murmured, "might account for all those differences."

Duncombe laughed as he followed his host's lead and rose.

"Get that maggot out of your brain, Andrew," he exclaimed, "as quickly as possible. Will you take my arm? Mind the corner."

They found the drawing-room almost deserted. Runton raised his eyeglass and looked around.

"I bet those women have collared the billiard table," he remarked. "Come along, you fellows."

They re-crossed the hall and entered the billiard-room. Lady Runton was playing with the Lord Lieutenant's wife, the Countess of Appleton. The others were all sitting about, either on the lounge or in the winter garden beyond. Miss Fielding was standing on

"Miss Fielding and the Baron were still together"

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the threshold, and Duncombe advanced eagerly towards her. On the way, however, he was buttonholed by an acquaintance, and the master of the hounds had something to say to him afterwards about one of his covers. When he was free, Miss Fielding had disappeared. He made his way into the winter garden, only to find her sitting in a secluded corner with the Baron. She looked up at his entrance, but made no sign. Duncombe reluctantly re-entered the billiard-room, and was captured by his host for a rubber of bridge.

The rubber was a long one. Duncombe played badly and lost his money. Declining to cut in again, he returned to the winter garden. Miss Fielding and the Baron were still together, only they had now pushed their chairs a little further back, and were apparently engaged in a very confidential conversation. Duncombe turned on his heel and re-entered the billiard-room.

It was not until the party broke up that he found a chance of speaking to her. He was sensible at once of a change in her manner. She would have passed him with a little nod, but he barred her way.

"You have treated me shockingly," he declared, with a smile which was a little forced. "You promised to let me show you the winter garden."

"Did I?" she answered. "I am so sorry. I must have forgotten all about it. The Baron has been entertaining me delightfully. Good night!"

He half stood aside.

"I haven't by any chance offended you, have I?" he asked in a low tone.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Certainly not!" she answered. "Excuse me, won't

you? I want to speak to Lady Runton before she goes upstairs."

Duncombe stood on one side and let her pass with a stiff bow. As he raised his eyes he saw that Mr. Fielding was standing within a few feet of him, smoking a cigarette. He might almost have overheard their conversation.

"Good night, Mr. Fielding," he said, holding out his hand. "Are you staying down here for long?"

"For two days, I believe," Mr. Fielding answered. "My daughter makes our plans."

He spoke very slowly, but without any accent. Nothing in his appearance, except perhaps the fact that he wore a black evening tie, accorded with the popular ideas of the travelling American.

"If you have an hour to spare," Duncombe said, "it would give me a great deal of pleasure if you and your daughter would walk down and have a look over my place. Part of the hall is Elizabethan, and I have some relics which might interest Miss Fielding."

Mr. Fielding removed the cigarette from his mouth.

"I thank you very much, sir," he said. "We are Lord Runton's guests, and our stay is so short that we could scarcely make any arrangements to visit elsewhere. Glad to have had the pleasure of meeting you all the same."

Duncombe sought out his host.

"Runton, old chap," he said, "do me a favor. Bring that fellow Fielding and his daughter round to my place before they go."

Lord Runton laughed heartily.

"Is it a case?" he exclaimed. "And you, our show bachelor, too! Never mind my chaff, old chap. She 's

a ripping good-looking girl, and money enough to buy the country."

"I don't mind your chaff," Duncombe answered, "but will you bring her?"

Lord Runton looked thoughtful.

"How the dickens can I? We are all shooting at the Duke's to-morrow, and I believe they 're off on Saturday. You 're not in earnest by any chance, are you, George?"

"Damnably!" he answered.

Lord Runton whistled softly.

"Fielding does n't shoot," he remarked, "but they 're going with us to Beaumanor. Shall I drop him a hint? He might stay a day longer — just to make a few inquiries about you on the spot, you know."

"Get him to stay a day longer, if you can," Duncombe answered, "but don't give me away. The old chap 's none too cordial as it is."

"I must talk to him," Runton said. "Your Baronetcy is a thundering sight better than any of these mushroom peerages. He probably does n't understand that sort of thing. But what about the girl? Old Von Rothe has been making the running pretty strong, you know."

"We all have to take our chance in that sort of thing," Duncombe said quietly. "I am not afraid of Von Rothe!"

"I 'll do what I can for you," Runton promised. "Good night!"

Andrew, who had left an hour or so earlier, was sitting in the library smoking a pipe when his host returned.

"Not gone to bed yet, then?" Duncombe remarked. "Let me make you a whisky and soda, old chap. You look a bit tired."

"Very good of you — I think I will," Andrew answered. "And, George, are you sure that I should not be putting you out at all if I were to stay — say another couple of days with you?"

Duncombe wheeled round and faced his friend. His reply was not immediate.

"Andrew," he said, "you know very well that I haven't a pal in the world I'd sooner have here than you for just as long as you choose to stay, but — forgive me if I ask you one question. Is it because you want to watch Miss Fielding that you have changed your mind?"

"That has a good deal to do with it, George," Andrew said quietly. "If I left without meeting that young lady again I should be miserable. I want to hear her speak when she does not know that any one is listening."

Duncombe crossed the room and laid his hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Andrew, old fellow," he said, "I can't have it. I can't allow even my best friend to spy upon Miss Fielding. You see — I've come a bit of a cropper. Quick work, I suppose, you'd say. But I'm there all the same."

"Who wants to spy upon Miss Fielding?" Andrew exclaimed hoarsely. "She can be the daughter of a multi-millionaire or a penniless adventurer for all I care. All I want is to be sure that she isn't Phyllis Poynton."

"You are not yet convinced?"

"No."

There was a moment's silence. Duncombe walked to the window and returned.

"Andrew," he said, "does n't what I told you just now make a difference?"

Andrew groaned.

"Of course it would," he answered, "but — I 'm fool enough to feel the same about Phyllis Poynton."

Duncombe, in the full glow of sensations which seemed to him to give a larger and more wonderful outlook on life, felt his sympathies suddenly awakened. Andrew Pelham, his old chum, sitting there with his huge, disfiguring glasses and bowed head, was surely the type of all that was pathetic. He forgot all his small irritation at the other's obstinacy. He remembered only their long years of comradeship and the tragedy which loomed over the life of his chosen friend. Once more his arm rested upon his shoulder.

"I 'm a selfish brute, Andrew!" he said. "Stay as long as you please, and get this idea out of your brain. I 'm trying to get Miss Fielding and her father down here, and if I can manage it anyhow I 'll leave you two alone, and you shall talk as long as you like. Come, we 'll have a drink together now and a pipe afterwards."

He walked across to the sideboard, where the glasses and decanters were arranged. Then for the first time he saw upon the tray awaiting him a telegram. He gave a little exclamation as he tore it open.

Andrew looked up.

"What is it, George?" he asked. "A telegram?"

Duncombe stood with his eyes glued upon the oblong strip of paper. A curious pallor had crept into his face from underneath the healthy tan of his complexion. Andrew, sightless though he was, seemed to feel the presence in the room of some exciting influence. He rose to his feet and moved softly across to the sideboard.

"Is it a telegram, George?" he whispered hoarsely. "Read it to me. Is it from Spencer?"

Duncombe collected himself with an effort.

"It's nothing," he answered with a little laugh, in which all the elements of mirth were lacking, "nothing at all! A note from Heggs, my head-keeper — about some poachers. Confound the fellow!"

Andrew's hand was suddenly upon the sideboard, travelling furtively across its shining surface. Duncombe watched it with a curious sense of fascination. He felt altogether powerless to interfere. He was simply wondering how long it would be before those long, powerful fingers seized upon what they sought. He might even then have swept aside the envelope, but he felt no inclination to do so. The fingers were moving slowly but surely. Finally, with a little grab, they seized upon it. Then there was another moment of suspense.

Slowly the hand was withdrawn. Without a second's warning Duncombe felt himself held in the grip of a giant. Andrew had him by the throat.

"You have lied to me, George!" he cried. "There was a telegram!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?"

IT seemed to Duncombe that time stood still. Andrew's face, wholly disfigured by the hideous dark spectacles, unrecognizable, threatening, was within a few inches of his own. He felt the other's hot breath upon his cheek. For a moment there stole through his numbed senses the fear of more terrible things. And then the grip which held him relaxed. Andrew stood away gasping. The crisis was over.

"You lied to me, George. Why?"

Duncombe did not answer. He could not. It was as though his body had been emptied of all breath.

"You meant to keep the contents of that telegram a secret from me. Why? Was I right after all? Read me that telegram, George. Read it me truthfully."

"The telegram is from Spencer," Duncombe said. "He is coming here."

"Here? Is he giving up the search? Has he failed, then?"

"He does not say," Duncombe answered. "He says simply that he is coming here. He has wired for a motor to meet him at Lynn. He may be here to-night."

A discordant laugh broke from Pelham's lips.

"What about your Miss Fielding, now?" he exclaimed. "Why do you suppose that he is leaving

Paris, and coming here? I was right. I knew that I was right."

Duncombe stood up. His expanse of shirt-front was crumpled and battered. His white tie was hanging down in ribbons.

"Listen, Andrew!" he exclaimed. "I am speaking of the girl by whose side I sat to-night at dinner, who calls herself Miss Fielding, who has — in plain words — denied that she knows anything of Phyllis Poynton. I want you to understand this. Whatever she may choose to call herself that shall be her name. I will not have her questioned or bullied or watched. If Spencer comes here to do either I have finished with him. I elect myself her protector. I will stand between her and all suspicion of evil things."

"She has found a champion indeed!" Pelham exclaimed fiercely. "With Miss Fielding I have nothing to do. Yet you had better understand this. If she be Phyllis Poynton she belongs to me, and not to you. She was mine before you heard her name. I have watched her grow up from a child, I taught her to ride and to shoot and to swim. I have watched her listening to the wind, bending over the flowers in her garden. I have walked with her over the moor when the twilight fell and the mists rose. We have seen the kindling of the stars, and we have seen the moon grow pale and the eastern sky ablaze. I have taught her where to look for the beautiful things of life. She has belonged to me in all ways, save one. I am a poor, helpless creature now, George, but, by the gods, I will let no one rob me of my one holy compensation. She is the girl I love; the better part of myself."

"Phyllis Poynton may be all these things to you,"

Duncombe answered. "I do not know her. I do not recognize her. Find her, if you can; make of her what you will. All that I ask of you is that you divest your mind of these senseless suspicions. Seek Phyllis Poynton where you will, but leave alone the woman whom I love. I will not have her troubled or annoyed by needless importunities. She says she is Miss Fielding. Then she is Miss Fielding. It is enough for me. It must be enough for you!"

"And what about Spencer?" Pelham asked grimly.

"Spencer in this matter is my servant," Duncombe answered. "If his search for Phyllis Poynton entails his annoying Miss Fielding, then he is dismissed. I will have no more to do with the business."

"I have heard of this man Spencer," Andrew answered. "If you think that he is the sort of creature whom you can order about like that, I fancy that you are mistaken. You may try to call him off, if you like, but you won't succeed. He is searching for Phyllis Poynton, and he is coming here. I believe that he will find her."

The windows were wide open, and both men suddenly turned round. There was no mistaking the sound which came to them from the road outside — the regular throb and beat of a perfectly balanced engine. Then they heard a man's voice, cool and precise.

"Here you are, then, and a sovereign for yourself. A capital little car this. Good night!"

The little iron gate opened and closed. A tall man in a loose travelling-coat, and carrying a small bag, entered. He saw Duncombe standing at the open window, and waved his hand. As he approached his boyish face lit up into a smile.

"What luck to find you up!" he exclaimed. "You got my telegram?"

"An hour ago," Duncombe answered. "This is my friend, Mr. Andrew Pelham. What will you have?"

"Whisky and soda, and a biscuit, please," was the prompt reply. "Have n't upset you, I hope, coming down from the clouds in this fashion?"

"Not in the least," Duncombe answered. "You 've made us very curious, though."

"Dear me!" Spencer exclaimed, "what a pity! I came here to ask questions, not to answer them. You 've set me a regular poser, Duncombe. By Jove! that 's good whisky."

"Help yourself," Duncombe answered. "We won't bother you to-night. I 'll show you a room as soon as you 've had a cigarette. Fair crossing?"

"No idea," Spencer answered. "I slept all the way. Jolly place you 've got here, Duncombe. Nice country, too."

"There is just one question," Pelham began.

"Sha'n't answer it — to-night," Spencer interrupted firmly. "I 'm dead sleepy, and I could n't guarantee to tell the truth. And when to-morrow comes — I 'll be frank with you — I 've very little to say. Pardon me, but where does Mr. Pelham come in in this matter?"

"Pelham," Duncombe said slowly, "was a neighbor of Miss Poynton's, in Devonshire. It was through him that I first went to Paris to search for her."

Spencer nodded.

"Glad to meet him, then," he remarked. "There are a few questions I shall be glad to ask him in the morning."

"There is one," Pelham said, "which you must answer now."

Spencer raised his eyebrows. He was standing with his back to them now, helping himself to sandwiches from a dish upon the sideboard.

"By Jove, your cook does understand these things," he remarked, with his mouth full. "No idea I was so hungry. What was that, Mr. Pelham? A question which must be answered now?"

"Yes. You telegraphed to Duncombe to know the names of Lord Runton's guests, and now you have come here yourself. Why?"

Spencer helped himself to another sandwich.

"I came here," he said, "because I did n't seem to be getting on in Paris. It struck me that the clue to Miss Poynton's disappearance might after all be on this side of the Channel."

Pelham guided himself by the table to the sideboard. He stood close to Spencer.

"Mr. Spencer," he said, "I am almost blind, and I cannot see your face, but I want you to tell me the truth. I expect it from you."

"My dear fellow," Spencer answered. "I 'm awfully sorry for you, of course, but I really don't see why I should answer your questions at all, truthfully or untruthfully. I have been making a few inquiries for my friend Duncombe. At present I regret to say that I have been unsuccessful. In their present crude state I should prefer keeping my discoveries, such as they are, to myself."

Pelham struck the sideboard with his clenched fist so that all the glasses rattled upon the tray. His face was dark with passion.

"I will not be ignored in this matter," he declared. "Phyllis Poynton and her brother are nothing to Duncombe. He acted only for me. He cannot deny it. Ask him for yourself."

"I do not need to ask him," Spencer answered. "I am perfectly well aware of the circumstances of the case. All the same, I go about my business my own way. I am not ready to answer questions from you or anybody else."

"You shall tell me this at least," Pelham declared. "You shall tell me why you telegraphed here for the names of Lord Runton's house party."

"Simplest thing in the world," Spencer answered, relinquishing his attack upon the sandwiches, and lighting a cigarette. "I did it to oblige a friend who writes society notes for the 'New York Herald.'"

Duncombe gave vent to a little exclamation of triumph. Pelham for the moment was speechless.

"Awfully sorry if I misled you in any way," Spencer continued. "I never imagined your connecting my request with the disappearance of Phyllis Poynton. Why should I?"

"The fact is," Duncombe interposed, "there is a girl staying at Runton Place whose voice Pelham declares is exactly like Phyllis Poynton's, and whose general appearance, I will admit, is somewhat similar to the photograph I showed you. It is a coincidence, of course, but beyond that it is absurd to go. This young lady is a Miss Fielding. She is there with her father, and they are invited guests, with all the proper credentials."

Spencer nodded.

"I suppose it is because I am not a lady's man," he

said carelessly, "but I must admit that all girls' voices sound pretty much alike to me."

"I wish to Heaven that I could see your face!" Pelham exclaimed, "I should know then whether you were telling me the truth."

"The weak point about my temporary profession is," Spencer remarked thoughtfully, "that it enables even strangers to insult one with impunity."

"If I have misjudged you," Pelham said with some dignity, "I am sorry. I am to understand, then, that you have no news whatever to give us about the disappearance of Phyllis Poynton and her brother?"

"Not a scrap!" Spencer answered.

"I will wish you both good night, then," Pelham said. "No, don't trouble, George. I can find my way quite well by myself."

He disappeared, and Duncombe drew a little sigh of relief.

"Excitable person, your friend!" Spencer remarked.

Duncombe nodded.

"Very! I am frightened to death that he will make an ass of himself before Miss Fielding. If he hears her speak he loses his head."

"Nice girl?" Spencer asked.

"Yes — very!"

"What sort of a fellow 's the father?"

"Very quiet. I've scarcely spoken to him. They're Americans. Friends of Lord Runton's brother, out in New York. Ever heard of them?"

"Yes. A few times."

"You seem interested."

"I am — very."

Duncombe turned suddenly white.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Spencer held his cigarette between his fingers and looked at it thoughtfully.

"Mr. Fielding, of New York," he said, "sailed for America from Havre last Saturday. His daughter has gone to Russia with a party of friends."

Duncombe sprang from his seat. His cigarette slipped from his fingers and fell unheeded upon the carpet.

"Then who — who are these people?" he exclaimed.

Spencer shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought it worth while," he said, "to come over and find out."

CHAPTER XIX

A HILLSIDE ENCOUNTER

A FEW minutes before ten the following morning a mounted messenger from Runton Place brought the following note for Duncombe: —

"RUNTON PLACE, *Friday Morning.*

"MY DEAR DUNCOMBE, — Fielding has cried off the shoot to-day. Says he has a motor coming over for him to try from Norwich, and his dutiful daughter remains with him. Thought I would let you know in case you cared to come and look them up. Best I could do for you.

"Ever yours sincerely,

"RUNTON."

Duncombe had breakfasted alone. Pelham had asked for something to be sent up for him, and Spencer, after a cup of coffee in his room, had gone out. Duncombe did not hesitate for a moment. He started at once for Runton Place.

A marvellous change had taken place in the weather since the previous day. The calm splendor of the early autumn seemed to have vanished. A strong north wind was blowing, and the sky was everywhere gray and threatening. The fields of uncut corn were bent like the waves of the sea, and the yellow leaves came down from the trees in showers. Piled up masses of black

clouds were driven across the sky. Scanty drops of rain kept falling, an earnest of what was to come as soon as the wind should fail. Duncombe had almost to fight his way along until, through a private gate, he entered Runton Park. The house lay down in the valley about a mile away. To reach it one had to cross a ridge of hills covered with furze bushes and tumbled fragments of ancient rock.

Half-way up the first ascent he paused. A figure had struggled into sight from the opposite side — the figure of a girl. Her skirts and cloak were being blown wildly about her. She wore a flat Tam-o'-Shanter hat, from under the confines of which her hair was defying the restraint of hatpins and elastic. She stood there swaying a little from the violence of the wind, slim and elegant, notwithstanding a certain intensity of gaze and bearing. Duncombe felt his heart give a quick jump as he recognized her. Then he started up the hill as fast as he could go.

She stood perfectly still, watching him clamber up to her side. Her face showed no sign of pleasure or annoyance at his coming. He felt at once that it was not he alone who had realized the coming of the tragedy.

No words of conventional greeting passed between them as he clambered breathless to her side. The wind had brought no color into her cheeks. There were rims under her eyes. She had the appearance of one who had come into touch with fearsome things.

"What do you want with me?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

"To be with you," he answered. "You know why."

She laughed mirthlessly.

"Better go back," she exclaimed. "I am no fit companion for any one to-day. I came out to be alone."

A gust of wind came tearing up the hillside. They both struggled for breath.

"I came," he said, "to find you. I was going to the house. Something has happened which you ought to know."

She looked back towards the long white front of the house, and there was terror in her eyes.

"Something is happening there," she muttered, "and I am afraid."

He took her gloveless hand. It was as cold as ice. She did not resist his touch, but her fingers lay passively in his.

"Let me be your friend," he pleaded. "Never mind what has happened, or what is going to happen. You are in trouble. Let me share it with you."

"You cannot," she answered. "You, nor any one else in the world. Let me go! You don't understand!"

"I understand more than you think!" he answered.

She turned her startled eyes upon him.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"I mean that the man whom we employed to trace the whereabouts of Phyllis Poynton and her brother arrived from Paris last night," he answered. "He wanted a list of Lord Runton's house party. Can you guess why?"

"Go on!"

"Mr. Fielding, of New York, left Havre on Saturday ——"

"Stop!"

Her voice was a staccato note of agony. Between the fingers which were pressed to her face he could see the slow, painful flushing of her cheeks.

"Why did you come to tell me this?" she asked in a low tone.

"You know," he answered.

"Did you guess last night that we were impostors?" she asked.

"Certainly not," he answered. "Andrew was tortured with doubts about you. He believed that you were Phyllis Poynton!"

"I am!" she whispered. "I was afraid of him all the evening. He must have known."

It seemed to Duncombe that the rocks and gorse bushes were spinning round and the ground was swaying under his feet. The wind, which had kept them both half breathless, seemed full of mocking voices. She was an impostor. These were her own words. She was in danger of detection, perhaps of other things. At that very moment Spencer might have gained an entrance into Runton Place. He felt uncertain of himself, and all the time her eyes watched him jealously.

"Why did you come here?" she cried. "Why do you look at me like that? It is no concern of yours who I am. Why do you interfere?"

"Everything that concerns you concerns me," he answered. "I don't care who you are, or who you say you are. I don't even ask you for any sort of explanation. I came to warn you about Spencer. For the rest, here am I your friend whatever happens. You are terrified! Don't go back to the house. Give me the right to take care of you. I'll do it!"

Then for the first time a really human expression lit up her face. The sick fear passed away. Her features were suddenly softer. The light in her eyes was a beautiful thing.

"You are kind," she murmured, "kinder than I ever dreamed any one could be who — knew. Will you be kinder still?"

"Try me!" he begged.

"Then go away. Forget who I am. Forget who I am not. Shut yourself up in your study for twenty-four hours, and come out without any memories at all. Oh, do this for me — do this!" she begged, with a sudden break in her voice.

She leaned a little towards him. A long wisp of her hair blew in his face. A moment of madness came to him with the gust of wind which blew her almost into his arms. For one exquisite moment he held her. The violets at her bosom were crushed against his coat. Then she tore herself away.

"You are mad," she cried. "It is my fault. Oh, let me go!"

"Never," he answered, passionately clasping at her hand. "Call yourself by what name you will, I love you. If you are in trouble, let me help. Let me go back to the house with you, and we will face it together, whatever it may be. Come!"

She wrung her hands. The joy had all gone from her face.

"Oh, what have I done?" she moaned. "Don't you understand that I am an impostor? The man down there is not my father. I — oh, let me go!"

She wrenched herself free. She stood away from him, her skirt gathered up into her hand, prepared for flight.

"If you would really do me a kindness," she cried, "get Mr. Spencer to stop his search for me. Tell him to forget that such a person ever existed. And you, too!

You must do the same. What I have done, I have done of my own free will. I am my own mistress. I will not be interfered with. Listen!"

She turned a white, intent face towards the house. Duncombe could hear nothing for the roaring of the wind, but the girl's face was once more convulsed with terror.

"What was that?" she cried.

"I heard nothing," he answered. "What can one hear? The wind is strong to drown even our voices."

"And those?" she cried again, pointing with outstretched finger to two rapidly moving black specks coming towards them along the winding road which led from the highway to Runton Place.

Duncombe watched them for a moment.

"They are the Runton shooting brakes," he declared. "I expect Lord Runton and the rest of them are coming back."

"Coming back!" she repeated, with a little gasp. "But they were going to shoot all day and dine there. They are not expected home till past midnight."

"I expect the shoot is off," Duncombe remarked. "One could n't possibly hit anything a day like this. I wonder they ever started."

Her face was white enough before, but it was deathly now. Her lips parted, but only a little moan came from them. He heard the rush of her skirts, and saw her spring forward. He was left alone upon the hilltop.

CHAPTER XX

MR. FIELDING IN A NEW RÔLE

RUNTON was apparently enjoying the relaxation of having got rid of practically the whole of its guests for the day. The women servants were going about their duties faithfully enough, but with a marked absence of any superfluous energy. Mr. Harrison, the butler, was enjoying a quiet pipe in his room and a leisurely perusal of the morning paper. Mrs. Ellis, the much-respected housekeeper, was also in her room comfortably ensconced in an easy-chair, and studying a new volume of collected menus which a friend had sent her from Paris. The servants were not exactly neglecting their work, but every one was appreciating a certain sense of peace which the emptying of the house from a crowd of more or less exacting guests had brought about.

In one room only things were different, and neither Mrs. Ellis nor Mr. Harrison, nor any of the household, knew anything about that. It was the principal guest-chamber on the first floor — a large and handsomely furnished apartment. Barely an hour ago it had been left in spotless order by a couple of painstaking servants. Just now it had another aspect.

In the middle of the room a man lay stretched upon the floor, face downwards. The blood was slowly

trickling from a wound in the side of the head down on to the carpet. With nearly every breath he drew he groaned. Overturned chairs and tables showed that he had taken part in no ordinary struggle. The condition of the other man also testified this.

The other man was Mr. Fielding. He was down on his knees upon the floor, rapidly going through the contents of a dark mahogany box, which was apparently full of papers. Scattered over the carpet by his side were various strange-looking tools, by means of which he had forced the lock. Mr. Fielding was not at all his usual self. His face was absolutely colorless, and every few moments his hand went up to his shoulder-blade and a shiver went through his whole frame. There was a faint odor of gunpowder in the room, and somewhere near the feet of the prostrate man lay a small shining revolver. Nevertheless, Mr. Fielding persevered in his task.

Suddenly there came an interruption. Footsteps outside in the corridor had paused. There was a sharp tapping at the door. The prostrate man groaned louder than ever, and half turned over, proving that he was not wholly unconscious. Mr. Fielding closed the box and staggered to his feet.

He stood for a moment staring wildly at the door. Who could it be? He had asked, as a special favor, that he might not be disturbed, and Mr. Fielding knew how to ask favors of servants. Interruption now meant disaster, absolute and unqualified — the end, perhaps, of a career in which he had achieved some success. Big drops of perspiration stood out upon his forehead, drawn there by the pain and this new fear. Slowly, and on tiptoe, he drew near the door.

"Who is that?" he asked with wonderful calmness.

"It is I! Let me in," came the swift answer, and Mr. Fielding drew a little breath of relief. Nevertheless he was angry. He opened the door and drew the girl in.

"You fool!" he exclaimed. "I sent you out of the way on purpose. Why have you come back?"

She opened her lips, but no words came. The man on the floor groaned again. She swayed upon her feet. It was all so horrible.

"Speak, can't you!" he muttered between his teeth. "Things have gone badly here. I'm wounded, and I'm afraid — I've hurt that chap — pretty badly."

"I was in the park," she faltered, "and saw them. They are all coming back."

"Coming back?"

"They are almost here. Sir George Duncombe told me that they could not shoot because of the wind."

"The car?"

"Downstairs — waiting."

He had forgotten his hurt. He caught up his hat and a coat, and pushed her out of the room. He locked the door, and thrust the key into his pocket. As they walked down the corridor he lit a cigarette.

A footman met them in the hall.

"A gentleman has called to see you, sir — a Mr. Spencer," he announced. "I have shown him into the library."

Mr. Fielding appeared to hesitate for a moment.

"It is the man who wants to sell us the car," he exclaimed, turning towards the girl, "but I haven't even seen it yet. Better tell him to wait for a quarter of an hour," he added, turning towards the footman. "I'll

just drive down to the lodge gates and back. Come along, Sybil."

She followed him to the front door. A man was seated at the wheel of the motor car, and turned his head quickly as they approached. Mr. Fielding nodded pleasantly, though his face was white with excruciating pain.

"Kept you waiting, I 'm afraid," he said. "Can you drive at all in a wind like this?"

"Jump in, sir, and see," the man answered. "Is the young lady coming?"

Mr. Fielding nodded, and stepped into the front seat. The girl was already in the tonneau. The man slipped in his clutch, and they glided round the broad, circular sweep in front of the entrance. Just as they started the wagonette drew up.

"We sha'n't be more than a few minutes," Mr. Fielding cried out, waving his hand. "Sorry you 've lost your day's sport."

"Hold on a minute, and I 'll come with you," Runton called out. "That car looks like going."

But Mr. Fielding did not hear.

. . . . . .

Duncombe, who had returned from the park by the fields, was crossing the road to enter his own gates, when a black speck far away on the top of the hill attracted his attention. He stood still gazing at it, and was instantly aware that it was approaching him at an almost incredible speed. It gathered shape swiftly, and he watched it with a fascination which kept him rooted to the spot. Above the wind he could hear the throbbing of its engines. He saw it round a slight curve in the road, with two wheels in the air, and a skid which

seemed for a moment as though it must mean destruction. Mud and small stones flew up around it. The driver was crouching forward over the wheel, tense and motionless. Duncombe moved to the side of the road to let it pass, with a little exclamation of anger.

Then it came more clearly into sight, and he forgot his anger in his amazement. The seat next the driver was occupied by a man leaning far back, whose face was like the face of the dead. Behind was a solitary passenger. She was leaning over, as though trying to speak to her companion. Her hair streamed wild in the wind, and on her face was a look of blank and fearful terror. Duncombe half moved forward. She saw him, and touched the driver's arm. His hand seemed to fly to the side of the car, and his right foot was jammed down. With grinding of brakes and the screaming of locked wheels, the car was brought to a standstill within a few feet of him. He sprang eagerly forward. She was already upon her feet in the road.

"Sir George," she said, "your warning, as you see, was barely in time. We are adventurer and adventuress — detected. I suppose you are a magistrate. Don't you think that you ought to detain us?"

"What can I do to help you?" he asked simply.

She looked at him eagerly. There were mud spots all up her gown, even upon her face. Her hair was wildly disordered. She carried her hat in her hand.

"You mean it?" she cried.

"You know that I do!"

She turned and looked up the road along which they had come. There was no soul in sight. She looked even up at the long line of windows which frowned down upon them from the back of the Hall. They,

too, were empty. She thrust a long envelope suddenly into his hand.

"Guard this for me," she whispered. "Don't let any one know that you have it. Don't speak of it to any one. Keep it until I can send for it."

He thrust it into his inner pocket and buttoned his coat.

"It is quite safe," he said simply.

Her eyes flashed her gratitude upon him. For the first time he saw something in her face — heard it in her tone, which made his heart beat. After all she was human.

"You are very good to me," she murmured. "Believe me, I am not quite as bad as I seem. Good-bye."

He turned with her towards the car, and she gave a low cry. He too started. The car was a mile away, tearing up a hill, and almost out of sight. In the lane behind they could hear the sound of galloping horses. He caught her by the wrist, dragged her through the gate, and behind a great shrub on the lawn.

"Stay there!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Don't move. I will come back."

Half a dozen horsemen were coming along the lane at steeplechase pace. Lord Runton, on his wonderful black horse, which no man before had ever seen him gallop save across the softest of country, pulled up outside the gate.

"Seen a motor go by, Duncombe?" he called out.

Duncombe nodded.

"Rather!" he answered. "Fielding and Miss Fielding in it. Going like Hell!"

Runton waved his companions on, and leaned down to Duncombe.

"Beastly unpleasant thing happened, Duncombe," he said. "Fielding and his daughter have bolted. Fielding seems to have half killed a messenger who came down from London to see Von Rothe, and stolen some papers. Fact of the matter is he's not Fielding at all — and as for the girl! Lord knows who she is. Sorry for you, Duncombe. Hope you weren't very hard hit!"

He gathered up his reins.

"We've sent telegrams everywhere," he said, "but the beast has cut the telephone, and Von Rothe blasphemes if we talk about the police. It's a queer business."

He rode off. Duncombe returned where the girl was standing. She was clutching at the branches of the shrub as though prostrate with fear, but at his return she straightened herself. How much had she heard he wondered.

"Don't move!" he said.

She nodded.

"Can any one see me?" she asked.

"Not from the road."

"From the house?"

"They could," he admitted, "but it is the servants' dinner hour. Don't you notice how quiet the house is?"

"Yes."

She was very white. She seemed to find some difficulty in speaking. There was fear in her eyes.

"It would not be safe for you to leave here at present," he said. "I am going to take you into a little room leading out of my study. No one ever goes in it. You will be safe there for a time."

"If I could sit down — for a little while."

He took her arm, and led her unresistingly towards the house. The library window was closed, but he opened it easily, and helped her through. At the further end of the room was an inner door, which he threw open.

"This is a room which no one except myself ever enters," he said. "I used to do a little painting here sometimes. Sit down, please, in that easy-chair. I am going to get you a glass of wine."

They heard the library door suddenly opened. A voice, shaking with passion, called out his name.

"Duncombe, are you here? Duncombe!"

There was a dead silence. They could hear him moving about the room.

"Hiding, are you? Brute! Come out, or I'll — by heavens, I'll shoot you if you don't tell me the truth. I heard her voice in the lane. I'll swear to it."

Duncombe glanced quickly towards his companion. She lay back in the chair in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXI

A WOMAN'S CRY

THE three men were sitting at a small round dining-table, from which everything except the dessert had been removed. Duncombe filled his own glass and passed around a decanter of port. Pelham and Spencer both helped themselves almost mechanically. A cloud of restraint had hung over the little party. Duncombe raised his glass and half emptied its contents. Then he set it down and leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said, "I am ready for the inquisition. Go on, Andrew."

Pelham fingered his own glass nervously. He seemed to find his task no easy one.

"George," he said, "we are old friends. I want you to remember it. I want you also to remember that I am in a hideous state of worry and nerves" — he passed his hand over his forehead just above his eyes as though they were hurting him. "I am not behaving to you as a guest should to his host. I admit it freely. I have lost my temper more than once during the last twenty-four hours. I am sorry! Forgive me if you can, George!"

"Willingly, Andrew," Duncombe answered. "I shall think no more about it."

"At the same time," Pelham continued, "there is another point to be considered. Have you been quite fair to me, George? Remember that Phyllis Poynton is the one person whose existence reconciles me to life. You had never even heard her name before I sent for you. You went abroad, like the good fellow you are, to find her for me. You assure me that you have discovered — nothing. Let me put you upon your honor, George. Is this absolutely true?"

"I have discovered nothing about Phyllis Poynton," Duncombe declared quietly.

"About Miss Fielding then?"

"Phyllis Poynton and Miss Fielding are two very different persons," Duncombe declared.

"That may be so," Pelham said, "although I find it hard to believe that God ever gave to two women voices so exactly similar. Yet if you are assured that this is so, why not be altogether frank with me?"

"What have you to complain of?" Duncombe asked.

"Something has happened at Runton Place, in which Mr. Fielding and his daughter are concerned," Pelham continued. "I have heard all manner of strange rumors. This afternoon I distinctly heard the girl's voice in the lane outside. She was crying out as though in fear. A few minutes later I heard you speaking to some one in the library. Yet when I entered the room you would not answer me."

"Supposing I grant everything that you say, Andrew," Duncombe answered. "Supposing I admit that strange things have happened with regard to Mr. Fielding and his daughter which have resulted in their leaving Runton Place — even that she was there in

the lane this afternoon — how does all this concern you?"

"Because," Pelham declared, striking the table with his fist, "I am not satisfied that the girl who has been staying at Runton Place, and calling herself Miss Fielding, is not in reality Phyllis Poynton."

Duncombe lit a cigarette, and passed the box round.

"Do you know what they are saying to-night of Mr. Fielding and his daughter?" he asked quietly.

"No!"

"That the one is a robber, and the other an adventuress," Duncombe answered. "This much is certainly true. They have both left Runton Place at a moment's notice, and without taking leave of their host and hostess. Remember, I never knew Phyllis Poynton. You did! Ask yourself whether she is the sort of young person to obtain hospitality under false pretences, and then abuse it — to associate herself in a fraud with a self-confessed robber."

"The idea," Pelham said quietly, "is absurd."

"While we are on the subject," Spencer remarked, drawing the cigarettes towards him, "may I ask you a few questions, Mr. Pelham? For instance, had Miss Poynton any relations in France?"

"Not to my knowledge," Pelham answered. "I have known both her and her brother for a great many years, and I never heard either of them mention any."

"Why did she go to Paris, then?"

"To meet her brother."

"And why did he go abroad?"

"It was a whim, I think. Just a desire to see a few foreign countries before he settled down to live the life of a country gentleman."

"You believe that he had no other reason?"

"I think I may go so far as to say that I am sure of it," Pelham answered.

"One more question," Spencer added, intervening.

But the question remained unasked. The butler had opened the dining-room door and was announcing Lord Runton.

Duncombe rose to his feet in surprise. For the moment a sudden fear drew the color from his cheeks.

He looked apprehensively towards his unexpected visitor. Lord Runton, however, showed no signs of any great discomposure. He was wearing his ordinary dinner clothes, and in reply to Duncombe's first question assured him that he had dined.

"I will try a glass of your port, if I may, George," he declared. "Thanks!"

The butler had wheeled a chair up to the table for him, and left the room. Lord Runton filled his glass and sent the decanter round. Then he turned towards Spencer, to whom he had just been introduced.

"Mr. Spencer," he said, "my visit to-night is mainly to you. I dare say you are aware that a somewhat unpleasant thing has happened at my house. My people tell me that you called there this morning and inquired for Mr. Fielding."

Spencer nodded.

"Quite true," he answered. "I called, but did not see him. He appears to have left somewhat hurriedly while I was waiting."

"You did not even catch a glimpse of him?"

"No!"

"You know Mr. Fielding by sight, I presume?"

"I have seen him in Paris once or twice," Spencer answered.

"You will not think me impertinent for asking you these questions, I am sure," Lord Runton continued apologetically, "but could you describe Mr. Fielding to me?"

"Certainly," Spencer answered. "He was tall and thin, wears glasses, was clean-shaven, bald, and limped a little."

Lord Runton nodded.

"Thank you," he said. "I presume that your visit this morning was one of courtesy. You are acquainted with Mr. Fielding?"

"I have not that pleasure," Spencer answered. "I am afraid I must confess that my visit was purely one of curiosity."

"Curiosity!" Lord Runton repeated.

"Exactly. Do you mind passing those excellent cigarettes of yours, Duncombe?"

Lord Runton hesitated for a moment. He was conscious of a certain restraint in Spencer's answers. Suddenly he turned towards him.

"Mr. Spencer," he said, "may I ask if you are Mr. Jarvis Spencer, of the 'Daily Messenger'—the Mr. Spencer who was mentioned in connection with the investigations into the Lawson estates?"

Spencer nodded.

"Yes," he said, "I am that person."

"Then," Lord Runton continued, "I want to tell you exactly what has happened to-day in my house, and to ask your advice. May I?"

"If our host has no objection," Spencer answered, glancing towards Pelham.

"None whatever," Duncombe answered, also glancing towards Pelham.

There was a moment's silence. Pelham raised his head.

"If Lord Runton desires it, I will withdraw," he said slowly. "At the same time I must confess that I, too, am interested in this matter. If Lord Runton has no objection to my presence I should like to remain. My discretion goes without saying."

Duncombe moved uneasily in his chair. His eyes sought Spencer's for guidance, but found his head averted. Lord Runton raised his eyebrows slightly at what he considered a somewhat vulgar curiosity, but his reply was prompt.

"You are a friend of Duncombe's, Mr. Pelham," he said, "and that is enough. I have to ask not only you, but all three of you, to consider what I am going to tell you as absolutely confidential."

They all signified their assent. Lord Runton continued:—

"Mr. and Miss Fielding came to me with letters from my brother, and with many convincing proofs of their identity. We none of us had the slightest suspicion concerning them. Their behavior was exactly what it should have been. Nothing about them excited remark in any way, except the unusual number of telegrams and telephone messages which Mr. Fielding was always receiving. That, however, was quite in accord with our ideas of an American business man, and did n't seem to us in the least remarkable."

"The telegrams were delivered through a neighboring office?" Spencer asked quietly.

"Yes," Lord Runton answered, "but they were all in

code. I happen to know that because the postmaster brought the first one up himself, and explained that he was afraid that he must have made some mistake as the message was incomprehensible. Fielding only laughed, and gave the man a sovereign. The message was absolutely correct, he declared. He told me afterwards that whenever he was speculating he always coded his messages, and it seemed perfectly reasonable."

Spencer nodded.

"Just so!" he murmured.

"This morning," Lord Runton continued, "Mr. Fielding rather upset our plans. We were all to have spent the day at the Duke's, and dined there. There was a big shoot for the men, as you know. At breakfast-time, however, Mr. Fielding announced that he had a man coming over with a motor car from Norwich for them to try, and begged to be excused. So we had to go without them.

"Von Rothe was staying with me, as you know, and just before we started he had a telegram that a messenger from the Embassy was on his way down. He hesitated for some time as to whether he ought not to stay at home so as to be here when he arrived, but we persuaded him to come with us, and promised to send him back after luncheon. When we got to Chestow, however, the wind had become a gale, and it was impossible to shoot decently. Von Rothe was a little uneasy all the time, I could see, so he and I and a few of the others returned here, and the rest went up to Chestow. Just as we arrived Fielding passed us in a great motor car with his daughter behind. When we got to the house Von Rothe inquired for the messenger. He was told that he was in Mr. Fielding's sitting-room, but when

we got there we found the door locked, and through the key-hole we could hear a man groaning. We broke the door in and found Von Rothe's messenger half unconscious, and a rifled despatch box upon the floor. He has given us no coherent account of what has happened yet, but it is quite certain that he was attacked and robbed by Mr. Fielding."

"What was stolen?" Spencer asked. "Money?"

"No, a letter," Lord Runton answered. "Von Rothe says very little, but I never saw a man so broken up. He has left for London to-night."

"The matter is in the hands of the police, of course?" Spencer asked.

Lord Runton shook his head.

"Von Rothe took me into his room and locked the door a few minutes after we had discovered what had happened. He implored me to keep the whole affair from the Press and from publicity in any form. His whole career was at stake, he said, and very much more than his career. All that we could do was to follow Mr. Fielding and drag him back by force if we could. Even then he had little hope of recovering the letter. We did our best, but, of course, we had no chance. Mr. Fielding and his daughter simply drove off. Von Rothe is dealing with the affair in his own way."

"It is a most extraordinary story," Spencer said quietly.

Lord Runton turned towards him.

"I have treated you with confidence, Mr. Spencer," he said. "Will you tell me now why you called at my house to see Mr. Fielding to-day?"

Spencer hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Certainly," he said. "I came because I knew that Mr. Fielding was half-way to America, and his daughter in Russia. Some friends of mine were curious to know who your guests could be."

Pelham raised his head.

"You lied to me then!" he exclaimed.

"I had as much right to lie to you," Spencer answered calmly, "as you had to ask me questions. I had ——"

He stopped short in the middle of his sentence. The faces of the three men were a study in varying expressions. From some other part of the house there came to them the sound of a woman's sudden cry of terror — the cry of a woman who had awakened suddenly to look into the face of death. Duncombe's uplifted glass fell with a crash upon the table. The red wine trickled across the table-cloth.

CHAPTER XXII

LORD RUNTON IS SUSPICIOUS

DUNCOMBE was out of the room in a very few seconds. The others hesitated for a moment whether to follow him or not. Spencer was the first to rise to his feet and moved towards the door. Lord Runton and Pelham followed a moment or two later. Outside in the hall the house was perfectly silent.

Duncombe reached the library door just in time to find himself confronted by half a dozen of the men and women servants coming from the back of the house. With his hand upon the door-knob he waved them back.

"Be so good, Mrs. Harrison," he said to the housekeeper, "as to keep better order in the servants' hall. We could hear some girls calling or laughing in the dining-room."

"Indeed, sir," Mrs. Harrison answered with some dignity, "the noise, whatever it was, did not come from the servants' quarters. We fancied that it came from your library."

"Quite impossible," Duncombe answered coolly. "If I require any one I will ring."

He passed through the door and locked it on the inside. In half a dozen hasty strides he was across the room and inside the smaller apartment where he had left the girl. With a little gasp of relief he realized that she was there still. She was pale, and a spot of

color was blazing in her cheeks. Her hair and dress were a little disordered. With trembling fingers she was fastening a little brooch into her blouse as he entered. A rush of night air struck him from a wide-open window.

"What has happened?" he called out.

"I have been terrified," she answered. "I am sorry I called out. I could not help it. A man came here — through the window. He talked so fast that I could scarcely hear what he said, but he wanted that paper. I tried to make him understand that I had not got it, but he did not believe me — and he was rude."

Duncombe shut down the window, swearing softly to himself.

"I cannot stay with you," he said, "just now. The whole house is alarmed at your cry. Listen!"

There was a loud knocking at the library door. Duncombe turned hastily away.

"I must let them in," he said. "I will come back to you."

She pointed to the window.

"He is coming back," she said, "at twelve o'clock."

"Do you wish me to give up the paper?" he asked.

"No."

"Very well. I will be with you when he comes — before then. I must get rid of these men first."

He closed the door softly, and drew the curtain which concealed it. Then he opened the library window, and a moment afterwards the door.

"Come in, you fellows," he said. "I scarcely

know what I was doing when I locked the door. I fancy one of the housemaids has been seeing ghosts in the garden. I saw something white in amongst the shrubs, but I could find nothing. Come on out with me."

Spencer followed with a perfectly grave face. Lord Runton looked puzzled. Pelham did not attempt to leave the library. Spencer drew his host a little on one side.

"What a rotten liar you are, George!" he said. "I don't think that even Runton was taken in."

"I suppose it sounded a little thin," Duncombe answered coolly. "Put it this way, then, so far as you are concerned. The shriek occurred in my house. I've no explanation to offer to anybody."

"I like the sound of that better, Duncombe," he remarked. "Hullo! What's the matter with Runton?"

Lord Runton was calling to them.

"You've had a visitor who was in a hurry, old chap!" he remarked. "Send for a lantern."

Duncombe concealed his annoyance.

"I don't want to alarm the whole household," he said. "I've a little electric torch in my study. I'll fetch that."

He brought it out. The progress of a man from the road to the small window, towards which Duncombe glanced every now and then apprehensively, was marked by much destruction. The intruder had effected his exit either in great haste or in a singularly unfortunate manner. He had apparently missed the gate, which at this point was only a small hand one, and in clambering over the fence he had broken the topmost strand of wire. He had blundered into a bed of wallflowers,

which were all crushed and downtrodden, and snapped off a rose tree in the middle. Below the window were distinct traces of footmarks. Lord Runton, who held the torch, was becoming excited.

"Duncombe," he said, "there is something which I have not told you yet. I have had numerous reports in about the car, and was able to trace it as far as Lynn, but they all agreed in saying that it contained only two persons — the driver and the man who called himself Fielding. What became of the girl?"

"I have no idea," Duncombe answered steadily.

"Of course not," Lord Runton continued, "but don't you think it possible that — without your knowledge, of course — she may be hidden somewhere about here? That cry was not like the cry of a housemaid. Let us have the whole place searched."

Duncombe shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will," he answered. "I am certain, however, that it will be useless. There is no place here where any one could hide."

"Your servants may know something," Runton suggested.

"I have already questioned them," Duncombe answered.

"Come along, Mr. Spencer," Lord Runton exclaimed, "let us search the grounds."

Spencer shook his head.

"Waste of time, Lord Runton," he answered. "If you really want to discover the whereabouts of this missing young lady, and she should by any chance be close at hand, I should recommend you to induce Sir George to let you search the room to which those footsteps lead."

"The library," Duncombe interrupted quickly. "Search it by all means, if you like. I have done so myself already."

Spencer was facing the house.

"The library!" he remarked reflectively. "Ah!"

He stooped down to light a cigarette. Suddenly he felt Duncombe's hot breath upon his cheek. In the momentary glow of the match he caught a silhouette of a pale, angry face, whose eyes were flashing upon him.

"This is n't your affair, Spencer. Shut up!"

Spencer blew out the match deliberately. They both followed Lord Runton to the library. Pelham was standing in the middle of the room. He had the appearance of a man listening intently.

"George," he asked sharply, "what is on the north side of this room?"

"The wall!" Duncombe answered.

"And beyond?"

"A passage and the billiard-room."

Pelham seemed dissatisfied.

"I fancied," he muttered — "but I suppose it must have been fancy. Do the women servants use that passage?"

"Of course! Upon my word," Duncombe added, with a nervous little laugh, "you all seem to be trying to make my house into a Maskelyne and Cooke's home of mystery. Let us go into the dining-room and have a whisky and soda."

"Not for me, thanks," Lord Runton declared. "I must go back. The real object of my coming here, Duncombe, was to see if the Mr. Spencer who called at Runton Place to-day was really Mr. Jarvis Spencer, and if so to ask him whether he would help me."

"To what extent, Lord Runton?" Spencer asked quietly.

"To the extent of recovering, or attempting to recover, the papers which were stolen from the Baron Von Rothe," Lord Runton said. "The Baron was a guest in my house, and I feel the occurrence very much. He will not let me even mention the matter to the police, but I feel sure that he could not object to Mr. Spencer's taking the matter in hand."

"I think you will find," Spencer said, "that Von Rothe has already placed the matter in the hands of his own people. The German secret service is pretty active over here, you know. I have come in contact with it once or twice."

"Nevertheless, for my own satisfaction," Lord Runton continued, "I should like the matter inquired into by you, Mr. Spencer."

"I am not quite sure whether I am free to help you or not," Spencer said slowly. "May I come and see you to-morrow morning?"

"If you prefer it," Lord Runton said doubtfully. "Come as early as possible. Good night, Duncombe! I should like to know who your nocturnal visitor was."

"If he comes again," Duncombe said, "I may be able to tell you."

He walked to his desk, and taking out a revolver, slipped it into his pocket. Then he rang the bell for Lord Runton's carriage. It seemed to Duncombe that there was a shade of coolness in his visitor's manner as he took his leave. He drew Spencer a little on one side.

"I want you to promise to come and see me in any case to-morrow morning," he said. "There is something

which I should prefer saying to you in my own house to saying here."

Spencer nodded.

"Very well," he said, "I will come. I can promise that much at least."

Lord Runton departed. Pelham went off to bed. Spencer and his host were left alone in the library.

"Billiards, or a whisky and soda in the smoke-room?" the latter asked. "I know that you are not a late bird."

"Neither, thanks. Just a word with you here," Spencer answered.

Duncombe paused on his way to the door. Spencer was standing in a reflective attitude, with his hands behind his back, gently balancing himself upon his toes.

"I am very much disposed," he said, "to accept Lord Runton's offer. Have you any objection?"

"Of course I have," Duncombe answered. "You are working for me."

"Was working for you," Spencer corrected gently. "That is all over, is n't it?"

"What do you mean?" Duncombe exclaimed.

Spencer stood squarely upon his feet. He looked a little tired.

"My engagement from you was to find Miss Phyllis Poynton," he said softly. "You and I are perfectly well aware that the young lady in question is — well, a few yards behind that curtain," he said, motioning with his head towards it. "My task is accomplished, and I consider myself a free man."

Duncombe was silent for a moment. He walked restlessly to the window and back again.

"How did you find out that she was here?" he asked.

Spencer looked a little disgusted.

"My dear fellow," he said, "any one with the brains of a mouse must have discovered that. Why, Lord Runton, without any of the intimations which I have received, is a little suspicious. That is merely a matter of A B C. There were difficulties, I admit, and I am sorry to say that I have never solved them. I cannot tell you at this moment how it comes about that a young lady, brought up in the country here, and from all I can learn an ordinary, unambitious, virtuous sort of young person, should disappear from England in search of a missing brother, and return in a few months the companion of one of the most dangerous and brilliant members of the French secret service. This sort of thing is clean beyond me, I admit. I will be frank with you, Duncombe. I have met with difficulties in this case which I have never met with before — peculiar difficulties."

"Go on!" Duncombe exclaimed eagerly.

"I have many sources of information in Paris," Spencer continued slowly. "I have acquaintances amongst waiters, cabmen, café-proprietors, detectives, and many such people. I have always found them most useful. I went amongst them, making careful inquiries about Phyllis Poynton and her brother. They were like men struck dumb. Their mouths were closed like rat-traps. The mention of either the boy or the girl seemed to change them as though like magic from pleasant, talkative men and women, very eager to make the best of their little bit of information, into surly idiots, incapable of understanding or answering the slightest question. It was the most extraordinary experience I have ever come across."

Duncombe was breathlessly interested.

"What do you gather from it?" he asked eagerly.

"I can only surmise," Spencer said slowly, "I can only surmise the existence of some power, some force or combination of forces behind all this, of the nature of which I am entirely ignorant. I am bound to admit that there is a certain amount of fascination to me in the contemplation of any such thing. The murder of that poor girl, for instance, who was proposing to give you information, interests me exceedingly."

Duncombe shuddered at the recollection. The whole scene was before him once more, the whole series of events which had made his stay in Paris so eventful. He laid his hand upon Spencer's arm.

"Spencer," he said, "you speak as though your task were accomplished. It is n't. Phyllis Poynton may indeed be where you say, but if so it is Phyllis Poynton with the halter about her neck, with the fear of terrible things in her heart. It is not you nor I who is the jailer of her captivity. It is some power which has yet to be discovered. Our task is not finished yet. To-night I will try to question her about this network of intrigue into which she seems to have been drawn. If she will see you, you too shall ask her about it. Don't think of deserting us yet."

"My dear Duncombe," Spencer said, "I may as well confess at once that the sole interest I felt in Lord Runton's offer was that it is closely connected with the matter we have been discussing."

"You shall have my entire confidence, Spencer," Duncombe declared. "The man who called himself Fielding was badly wounded, and he passed here almost unconscious. He entrusted the paper or let-

ter, or whatever it was, he stole from Von Rothe's messenger, to his so-called daughter, and she in her turn passed it on to me. It is at this moment in my possession."

Spencer looked very serious.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I congratulate you upon your pluck, but not upon your discretion. You are interfering in what may turn out to be a very great matter — a matter in which a few lives are like the pawns which are swept from the chess-board. Does any one know this?"

"She and I only! You heard her shriek?"

"Yes."

"A man threw up her window and climbed in. He demanded the packet. He searched the room. When he left her he declared that he should return at twelve to-night, and if she did not hand it to him then he threatened her."

Spencer smiled, and rubbed his hands softly together.

"Really," he murmured, "this is most interesting. I am with you, Duncombe. With you altogether! There is only one more question."

"Well?"

"You did not know Phyllis Poynton. You took up this search for her out of your friendship for Pelham. You are a rich man, young, strong, with every capacity for enjoyment. What induces you to risk your life in an adventure of this sort? You see, I don't mince words."

Then Duncombe became grave. His face fell into firm, hard lines. Yet as he spoke there was something boyish about his expression.

"It is a fair question," he answered. "You won't

understand me. I don't understand myself. I've a brilliant galaxy of fools behind me. They've made the pages of history interesting. They've been the butt always of wiser men such as you, Spencer. The girl in that room may be Phyllis Poynton or the worst adventuress who ever lied her way through the mazes of intrigue, but I love her! She's in my life — a part of it. If I lose her — well, you know what life is like when the flame has gone and only the embers burn."

Spencer nodded very softly.

"That is sufficient!" he said. "You speak of things that I myself do not understand. But that is nothing. I know that they exist. But ——"

"Well?"

"But what about Pelham?"

"Pelham has no prior claim," he answered. "As soon as she is safe he shall know the whole truth. I would tell him at this moment but that I am a little afraid of him. He would never understand, as we can, the intricacy of the situation. And now — to the prosaic."

He rang the bell.

"Groves," he told the butler, "I am hungry. Bring me in anything you can rake up for supper on a tray, and a pint of champagne."

Spencer raised his eyebrows and smiled. Duncombe nodded.

"For her, of course," he said. "I am going to take it in, and I want you to stay here. It is past eleven o'clock already."

CHAPTER XXIII

HER FIRST KISS

"I WAS never," she declared, "quite so pleased to see any one in all my life. I was wondering whether it would occur to you that I was starving."

He set the tray down for her, placed a chair in front of the table, and busied himself opening the wine. All the time he was looking at her.

"Whatever have you been doing to yourself?" he asked at length.

She laughed softly.

"Oh, I had to amuse myself somehow," she answered. "I've done my hair a new way, rearranged all my ornaments, and really I don't think a man has a right to such a delightful manicure set. I felt terribly nervous in the lavatory, though. I could hear some one in the billiard-room all the time."

"That's all right!" he declared. "I've locked the door there, and have the key in my pocket. No one can get in from that side."

"Please talk, and don't watch me," she begged. "I'm ashamed to be so hungry."

He smiled and helped her to some more chicken. If he talked he was scarcely conscious of what he said. All the time his eyes kept straying towards her. She had taken off her jacket and was dressed simply enough in a blouse of some soft white material and a dark skirt.

Everything, from the ornaments at her neck, the dull metal waistband, and the trim shoes, seemed to him to be carefully chosen, and the best of their sort. She wore no rings, and her fingers had the rosy pinkness of health. If she had seemed graceful to him before in the drawing-room of Runton Place, and surrounded by some of the most beautiful women in the country, she seemed more than ever so now, seated in the somewhat worn chair of his little studio. The color, too, seemed to have come back to her cheeks. She seemed to have regained in some measure her girlishness. Her eyes were ever ready to laugh into his. She chattered away as though the world after all contained nothing more serious for her than for any other girl. Duncombe hated to strike another note, yet he knew that sooner or later it must be done.

"You are quite sure that you will not have anything else?" he asked.

"Absolutely, thanks! I have never enjoyed anything so much in my life."

He glanced at his watch. It was half-past eleven.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am going to be a nuisance to you, but one's friends often are that. I want to be your friend. I want to prove myself such. I am not an inquisitive person, by any means, but fate has declared that I should be your inquisitor. There are some questions which I am bound to ask you."

Her face grew suddenly grave.

"There is so little," she murmured, "which I can tell you."

"We shall see," he answered. "In the first place, Lord Runton has been here. He is one of my oldest friends, and a very good fellow. He came to tell me

that Von Rothe had been robbed in his house of some valuable papers. He came partly to ask my advice. All the time I was sitting opposite to him, with those papers in my pocket."

She looked at him strangely.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "you gave them up to him."

"I did not," he answered. "You know very well that I did not."

"It was your duty," she said in a low tone.

"Perhaps so. On the other hand," he continued, "you trusted me. The papers are safe."

"Does he know that you have them?" she asked.

"He knows nothing!"

She looked at him steadfastly — not with any appearance of doubting his word, and yet as though she were revolving something in her mind concerning him.

"I am thinking," she said, "how much better it would have been for both of us if we had never met."

"The fates thought otherwise," he answered. "I searched Paris for you, only to find you at my gates. The fates meant you to be my friend. We must be careful not to disappoint them."

She shook her head a little wistfully.

"You have been very good to me," she said, "but you don't understand ——"

"Precisely!" he interrupted. "I don't understand. I want to. To begin with — what in this world induced you to throw in your lot even for an hour with the man who called himself Fielding?"

"I can answer no questions concerning myself," she said sadly.

He smiled.

"Come," he said, "it is n't so serious as all that, is it? Sooner or later your friends are sure to find you, and they will not be content with such a statement as that. You were summoned one day to Paris by or on behalf of your brother, who had unaccountably disappeared there. You immediately appear to have followed suit. You had no friends in Paris — neither, I think, had he. I believe I am correct in saying that you had neither of you ever been there before. If your brother has fallen into bad hands, and if those same people are trying to work upon your fears by leading you into this sort of thing — well, I have friends who are powerful enough to bring you safely out of any den of thieves in the world. You are in an impossible situation, my dear young lady. Nature never meant you for an adventuress. There is no necessity for you to become one. Why do you look at me like that?"

There was terror in her face. He had hoped to reassure her, to give her courage. On the contrary every word he spoke only seemed to increase her distress.

"Oh, I am afraid!" she murmured. "I wish I had taken my chance. I ought not to have burdened you for a moment with my affairs. I have given you the right to ask me questions which I cannot answer."

He was perplexed.

"If you have given promises to these people ——" he began.

"Oh, there is no question of promises," she interrupted. "I am here of my own free will. I refuse to answer any questions. I pray only if you would be generous that you ask me none, that you keep me

until to-morrow, and let me go, not only from this place, but out of your life. Then indeed I will be grateful to you."

He took her hand in his. She yielded it without any attempt at resistance, but it lay in his palm a cold, dead thing.

"I am only concerned for your good," he said gently. "It is your happiness only that I am anxious for. You were not born or trained for a life of lies and crime. I want to save you from it before it is too late."

"What I do," she said slowly, "I do of my own free will."

"Not quite, I think," he answered, "but let that pass. Listen! If you will not talk to me about these things, will you talk to my friend, Jarvis Spencer? He is a gentleman, and a journalist by profession, but he is also one of the cleverest amateur detectives in England."

She held up her hands with a little gesture of horror. Her eyes were alight with fear.

"No!" she cried. "No! A thousand times, no! Don't let him come near me, please. Oh, I wish I could make you understand," she continued helplessly. "You yourself in Paris only a few weeks ago were in terrible danger. A girl who only gave, or meant to give, you information about my brother and me was murdered. You, too, would have been killed if you had found anything out."

He would have answered her lightly, but the memory of Mademoiselle Flossie lying dead upon the bed in that gloomy little room suddenly rose up before him, and the words died away upon his lips. He was silent for a moment, and glanced again at his watch. It wanted

only five minutes to twelve. He came and leaned over her chair.

"Phyllis," he said, "what am I to do about you? I cannot let you go out of my life like this. No, you must listen to me for a moment. When Pelham sent for me after you had disappeared he showed me your picture. I am not exactly the sort of man of whom knight-errants are made. I have never gone a mile out of my way to meet any woman in my life. My life here has seemed of all things the best to me. I am a dull, unambitious sort of fellow, you know, since I settled down here, and I expected to go on for the rest of my days pretty much in the same way. And yet when Pelham showed me your picture it was different. I made him give a copy to me. I told him — liar that I was — that I could not carry the memory of your face in my mind, when it was already engraven in my heart. And I went off to Paris, Phyllis, like the veriest Don Quixote, and I came back very sad indeed when I could not find you. Then you came to Runton Place, and the trouble began. I did not care who you were, Phyllis Poynton, Sybil Fielding, or any one else. I let the others dispute. You were — yourself, and I love you, dear. Now do you understand why I cannot let you go away like this?"

He had both her hands in his now, but her face was turned away. Then without any warning, there came a soft rapping at the door which led into the library.

Duncombe reached it in a couple of strides. He opened it cautiously, and found Spencer standing there.

"I thought it best to let you know," he said, "that a carriage has stopped in the lane. If I can be of any assistance I shall be here — and ready."

"Duncombe started back. The girl half rose to her feet."

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Duncombe nodded and closed the door. The girl was sitting upright in her chair, with the old look of fear in her eyes.

"Who was that?" she asked quickly.

"Spencer," he answered. "He discovered your presence here, but he is perfectly discreet. He knocked to tell me that a carriage has stopped in the lane outside."

She was white with fear, but he only laughed, and stooping down would have taken her hands once more. But at that moment an unexpected sound intervened. The deep silence of the house was broken by the ringing of the front door bell.

Duncombe started back. The girl half rose to her feet.

"The front door!" he exclaimed. "The servants will have gone to bed. I must answer it myself."

She clung to him with a sudden abandon. She was white to the lips.

"I am afraid," she moaned. "Don't leave me alone."

He glanced towards the window.

"By Jove, it may be a trap!" he exclaimed. "Let them ring. I'll stay here with you."

They stood hand in hand listening. His head was turned towards the door, but the gentle pressure of her fingers drew him round. Her face was upturned to his. Something of the fear had gone. There was an eager, almost desperate, light in her softened eyes, and a tinge of color in her cheeks. He caught her into his arms, and their lips met. She disengaged herself almost immediately.

"I don't care," she said with a little laugh. "That is the first kiss I have ever given to a man, and very likely

it will be the last. You won't be able to say that I have gone away without paying my bill. Now go and open the front door, Sir George."

He hesitated for a moment.

"Say only the word, Phyllis, and no one in the world shall ever take you away."

She did not even answer him. He left her with a little sigh.

"Spencer," he said, "if you hear the slightest noise in that room go in and shout for me."

Spencer nodded. The front door bell rang again.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE EMPTY ROOM

DUNCOMBE unfastened the chain and bolts of the ponderous front door, and looked out into the darkness. A carriage and pair of horses were drawn up outside. A man and a woman, both dressed in long travelling-coats, were standing upon the door-step.

"This is Duncombe Hall, I believe?" the man said. "Is Sir George Duncombe at home?"

"I am Sir George Duncombe," he answered. "Will you come inside?"

They crossed the threshold at once. The man was tall and dark, and his voice and bearing were unmistakable. The woman was fair, *petite*, and apparently very sleepy. She wore magnificent furs, and she had the air of being in a very bad temper.

"We really are heartily ashamed of ourselves for disturbing you at such an hour, Sir George," the man said, "but you will pardon us when you understand the position. I am the Marquis de St. Ethol, and this is my wife. I have a letter to you from my friend the Duke of Chestow, with whom we have been staying."

Duncombe concealed his astonishment as well as he was able. He bowed to the lady, and led them towards the library. Spencer, who had heard them coming, had hastily concealed his revolver, and was lounging in an easy-chair reading the evening paper.

"I am afraid that my servants are all in bed," Duncombe said, "and I can offer you only a bachelor's hospitality. This is my friend, Mr. Spencer — the Marquis and Marquise de St. Ethol. Wheel that easy-chair up, Spencer, will you?"

Spencer's brow had betrayed not the slightest sign of surprise, but Duncombe fancied that the Marquis had glanced at him keenly. He was holding a note in his hand, which he offered to Duncombe.

"My errand is so unusual, and the hour so extraordinary," he said, "that I thought it would be better for Chestow to write you a line or two. Will you please read it?"

Duncombe tore open the envelope.

"CHESTOW, *Wednesday Evening.*

"MY DEAR DUNCOMBE, — My friend De St. Ethol tells me that he is obliged, at great personal inconvenience, to execute a commission for a friend which involves a somewhat unceremonious call upon you to-night. He desires me, therefore, to send you these few lines. The Marquis de St. Ethol and his wife are amongst my oldest friends. It gives me great pleasure to vouch for them both in every way.

"Yours sincerely,

"CHESTOW."

"The letter, I am afraid," the Marquis said, smiling, "does little to satisfy your curiosity. Permit me to explain my errand in a few words."

"Certainly," Duncombe interrupted. "But won't you take something? I am glad to see that Spencer is looking after your wife."

The Marquise had raised her veil, and was leaning

back in a chair, with a sandwich poised in the fingers of one hand and a glass of Burgundy in the other. She was looking a little less bored, and was chatting gayly to Spencer, whose French was equal to her own.

"I thank you very much," the Marquis said. "I will not take anything to drink, but if you have cigarettes — ah, thanks!"

He lit one, and sat on the arm of an easy-chair.

"The facts are these," he said. "I have a great friend in Paris who, knowing that I was at Chestow, and returning to France to-morrow, has, I must say, taken some advantage of my good nature. I am asked to call here and escort home to her friends a young lady, who, I understand, is for the moment a guest under your roof. My friend, I must say, telegraphs in a most mysterious manner, but he is evidently very anxious that we should accede to his request. Our appearance here at this time of night I admit is most unjustifiable, but what were we to do? It is absolutely necessary for my wife to catch the two-twenty from Charing Cross to-morrow. I hope that my friend will some day appreciate my devotion. To come round by your house I have had to borrow a carriage from my friend Chestow. We shall have to drive to Norwich, and catch a train from there to London in the small hours of the morning. I presume the young lady is here?"

"The young lady is here!" Duncombe answered. "May I inquire the name of the friend to whom you are asked to take her?"

The Marquis yawned slightly. He, too, seemed weary.

"My dear Sir George," he said, "I trust that you will appreciate my position in this matter. I do not even know the young lady's name. My eccentric friend in his telegram, which occupied four forms, most specially insisted that I should ask or answer no questions concerning her."

"You are not aware, then, of the circumstances which led to her coming here?" Duncombe asked.

"I am utterly ignorant of them," the Marquis answered. "I am constrained to remain so."

"You no doubt have some message for her," Duncombe said. "Her position here is a little peculiar. She may desire some sort of information as to her destination."

The Marquis knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"If you will produce the young lady," he said, "I think that you will find her prepared to come with us without asking any questions."

Duncombe threw open the door which led into the inner room. The girl stepped forward as far as the threshold and looked out upon them.

"The Marquis and the Marquise de St. Ethol," Duncombe said to her. "They have brought me a letter from the Duke of Chestow, and they have come to take you back to France."

The girl looked fixedly for a moment at the Marquise. If any word or sign passed between them it escaped Duncombe. Phyllis was content, however, to ask no questions.

"I am quite ready," she said calmly.

The Marquise rose.

"Your luggage can be sent on," she remarked.

Duncombe approached Phyllis, and stood by her side.

"These people," he said, "will not tell me where they are taking you to. Are you content to go?"

"I must go," she answered simply.

"You wish me to give you ——"

"If you please," she interrupted.

He turned towards the door.

"I have something belonging to Miss — to my guest," he said, "in my own room. If you will excuse me for a moment I will fetch it."

He returned with the sealed envelope which she had given him, and which he placed in her hands. He carried also a fur coat and an armful of wraps.

"You must take these," he declared. "It is cold travelling."

"But how can I return them to you?" she protested. "No, not the coat, please. I will take a rug if you like."

"You will take both," he said firmly. "There need be no trouble about returning them. I shall be in Paris myself shortly, and no doubt we shall come across one another."

Her eyes flashed something at him. What it was he could not rightly tell. It seemed to him that he saw pleasure there, and fear, but more of the latter. The Marquis intervened.

"I trust," he said, "that in that case you will give us the pleasure of seeing something of you. We live in the Avenue de St. Cloud."

"You are very kind," Duncombe said. "I shall not fail to come and see you."

Spencer threw open the door, and they passed out. Phyllis kept by Duncombe's side. He felt her hand steal into his.

"I want you to keep this envelope for me," she

whispered. "It contains nothing which could bring you into trouble, or which concerns any one else. It is just something which I should like to feel was in safe keeping."

He thrust it into his pocket.

"I will take care of it," he promised. "And — you won't forget me? We shall meet again — sooner perhaps than you expect."

She shook her head.

"I hope to Heaven that we shall not! At least, not yet," she murmured fervently.

From the carriage window she put out her hand.

"You have been very kind to me," she said. "Good-bye!"

"An impossible word," he answered, with well-affected gayety. "A pleasant journey to you."

Then the carriage rolled away, and Spencer and he were left alone. Duncombe secured the front door, and they walked slowly back to the library.

"You know Paris well," Duncombe said. "Have you ever heard of these people?"

Spencer smiled.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "De St. Ethol is one of the first nobles in France. I have seen him at the races many times."

"Not the sort of people to lend themselves to anything shady?"

"The last in the world," Spencer answered. "She was the Comtesse de Laugnan, and between them they are connected with half a dozen Royal houses. This business is getting exceedingly interesting, Duncombe!"

But Duncombe was thinking of the empty room.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

GUY POYNTON AGAIN

"I SUPPOSE," the boy said thoughtfully, "I must seem to you beastly ungrateful. "You've been a perfect brick to me ever since that night. But I can't help being a bit homesick. You see, it was really the first time I'd ever been away from home for long, and though my little place isn't a patch on this, of course, still, I was born there, and I'm jolly fond of it."

His companion nodded, and his dark eyes rested for a moment upon the other's face. Guy Poynton was idly watching the reapers at work in the golden valley below, and he did not catch his friend's expression.

"You are very young, *mon cher ami*," he said. "As one grows older one demands change. Change always of scene and occupation. Now I, too, am most hideously bored here, although it is my home. For me to live is only possible in Paris — Paris, the beautiful."

Guy looked away from the fields. He resented a little his friend's air of superiority.

"There's only a year's difference in our ages!" he remarked.

Henri de Bergillac smiled — this time more expressively than ever, and held out his hands.

"I speak of experience, not years," he said. "You have lived for twenty years in a very delightful spot no doubt, but away from everything which makes life endurable, possible even, for the child of the cities. I have lived for twenty-one years mostly in Paris. Ah, the difference!"

Guy shrugged his shoulders, and leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said briefly, "tastes differ. I've seen quite all I want to of Paris for the rest of my life. Give me a fine June morning in the country, and a tramp round the farm, or an early morning start in September walking down the partridges, or a gray day in November with a good gee underneath, plenty of grass ahead, and hounds talking. Good God, I wish I were back in England."

Henri smiled and caressed his upper lip, where symptoms of a moustache were beginning to appear.

"My dear Guy," he said, "you speak crudely because you do not understand. You know of Paris only its grosser side. How can one learn more when he cannot even speak its language? You know the Paris of the tourist. The real magic of my beautiful city has never entered into your heart. Your little dabble in its vices and frivolities must not count to you as anything final. The joy of Paris to one who understands is the exquisite refinement, the unsurpassed culture, of its abysmal wickedness."

"The devil!" Guy exclaimed. "Have you found out all that for yourself?"

Henri was slightly annoyed. He was always annoyed when he was not taken seriously.

"I have had the advantage," he said, "of many friend-

ships with men whose names you would scarcely know, but who directed the intellectual tendencies of the younger generation of Parisians. People call us decadents — I suppose, because we prefer intellectual progression to physical activity. I am afraid, dear friend, that you would never be one of us."

"I am quite sure of it," Guy answered.

"You will not even drink absinthe," Henri continued, helping himself from a little carafe which stood between them, "absolutely the most artistic of all drinks. You prefer a thing you call a pipe to my choicest cigarettes, and you have upon your cheeks a color of which a ploughboy should be ashamed."

Guy laughed good-humoredly.

"Well, I can't help being sunburnt!" he declared.

Henri sighed delicately.

"Ah, it is not only that," he said. "I wish so much that I could make you understand. You positively cultivate good health, take cold baths and walks and exercises to preserve it."

"Why the dickens should n't I?"

Henri half closed his eyes. He was a dutiful nephew, but he felt that another month with this clodhopper of an English boy would mean the snapping of his finely strung nerves.

"My friend," he began gently, "we in Paris of the set to whom I belong do not consider good health to be a state which makes for intellectual progression. Good health means the triumph of the physical side of man over the nervous. The healthy animal sleeps and eats too much. He does not know the stimulus of pain. His normal condition is unaspiring — not to say bovine. The first essential, therefore, of life,

according to our tenets, is to get rid of superfluous health."

Guy did not trust himself to speak this time. He only stared at his companion, who seemed pleased to have evoked his interest.

"Directly the body is weakened," Henri continued. "the brain begins to act. With the indisposition for physical effort comes activity of the imagination. Cigarettes, drugs, our friend here," he continued, patting the carafe, "late nights, *la belle passion* — all these — all these ——"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence. Simultaneously he abandoned his carefully chosen attitude of studied languor. He was leaning forward in his chair watching a carriage which had just come into sight along the straight wide road which led from the outside world to the chateau.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "My respected uncle! Jacques!"

A man-servant stepped out upon the terrace.

"Monsieur!"

"Remove the absinthe, Jacques. Monsieur le Duc arrives!"

Guy, who also had been watching the carriage, gave utterance to a little exclamation. He pointed to two figures on horseback who rode behind the carriage.

"The gendarmes!" he exclaimed. "They have come for me at last!"

His face was no longer ruddy. The pallor of fear had crept to his cheeks. A note of despair rang in his voice.

His companion only laughed.

"Gendarmes, perhaps," he answered, "but not for you, my young friend. Have I not told you that you are in sanctuary here? A guest of the Duc de Bergillac evades all suspicion. Ah, I understand well those gendarmes. Let their presence cause you no anxiety, *cher monsieur*. They are a guard of honor for my reverend uncle and the personage who rides with him."

Guy resumed his chair, and sat with his head buried in his hands in an attitude of depression. His companion leaned over the stone balustrade of the terrace and waved his hand to the occupants of the carriage below. They pulled up at the bottom of the steps and commenced slowly to ascend. In obedience to an imperious gesture from his uncle, Henri advanced to meet them. He greeted his uncle with graceful affection. Before the other man, although his appearance was homely and his dress almost untidy, he bowed very low indeed, and accepted his proffered hand as a mark of favor.

The Duc de Bergillac was tall, sallow, with black moustache and imperial. He possessed all the personal essentials of the aristocrat, and he had the air of one accustomed to command.

"Henri," he said, "your young friend is with you?"

"But certainly," his nephew answered with a sigh. "Am I not always obedient? He has scarcely been out of my sight since we arrived."

"Very good! You saw us arrive just now. Did you mention the name of Monsieur Grisson?" the Duke asked.

"But certainly not!" Henri answered.

The Duke nodded.

"You have discretion," he said. "Monsieur Grisson is here incognito. He wishes to hear your young friend's story from his own lips."

The Duke's companion nodded silently. He had the air of a silent man. He was short, inclined to be stout, and his dress and bearing were almost bourgeois. His features were large and not particularly intelligent, his cheeks were puffy, and his gray beard ill-humored. He had the double neck of the Frenchman of the lower class who has not denied himself the joys of the cuisine, and his appearance would have been hopelessly commonplace but for the deep-set brilliant black eyes which lit up his whole face and gave it an aspect of power.

"After *déjeuner*, you understand," he said. "It is well that your young friend should not understand that I came here for no other reason. I will see first your manuscripts, Monsieur le Duc."

The Duke waved his hand courteously to Guy as the two men passed along on their way to the library. Henri resumed his seat with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"My respected uncle will bring such strange people here to see his manuscripts and collection of missals," he remarked. "For myself it is a hobby which wearies me. And you, *mon cher* Guy?"

"I know nothing about them," he answered. "But the gendarmes, Henri? Why did they ride with your uncle's carriage?"

Henri smiled reassuringly.

"The old gentleman," he said, "has something to do with the Government, and they were in attendance upon him. You can realize, my friend," he added, "that

you are indeed in a republican country. Such people must have the *entrée* to our houses, even to our table. I presume that you will have the pleasure of taking luncheon with him even."

A man-servant came out upon the terrace.

"Monsieur le Duc desires me to say that luncheon is served," he announced.

Henri passed his arm through his friend's.

"Come," he said, "let us go and see if we can amuse ourselves with my uncle's venerable friend. I do not suppose that he speaks English, but I will interpret for you."

CHAPTER II

AN OLD STORY

GUY moved uneasily upon his chair. The color mounted almost to his forehead. It was a humiliation this, upon which he had not counted. Monsieur Grisson was sitting within a few feet of him. A serviette was tucked carefully underneath his collar, and his face was a little flushed with the exercise of eating. His eyes, however, were undimmed, and his manners, although a little brusque, had certainly not merited the epithet of bourgeois.

"It isn't much of a story," Guy began, making a desperate effort. "It was my first visit to Paris, and I lost my head a bit. I drank too much wine and quarrelled with a fellow who certainly insulted me. They all told me that I must fight him, so ——"

"Stop, Monsieur Poynton!"

Guy raised his head in surprise. The exclamation had come from the Duc de Bergillac. Monsieur Grisson was looking towards him as though for an explanation.

"My dear young friend," the Duke remarked with a smile, "it is my stupidity which is to blame. I had forgotten the little matter to which you are alluding, and — between ourselves — it is one which is very much better not related to Monsieur Grisson. I was alluding to your other adventure — up in the Pozen forest."

Guy for a moment was too astonished for words. Then he recovered himself with a little laugh and raised his head. There was nothing terrible in the other affair.

"I will tell Monsieur Grisson about that with pleasure," he said, "if it is likely to interest him. I was in the North of Germany on a walking-tour, and I had rather a stupid fancy to go as far as the Russian frontier, and then return by Vienna to Paris. I was quite alone, and had no one's plans but my own to consult, so I started off from Steritz, I think the place was called. Well, we were within about forty miles of a place called Renzan when our train was stopped and shunted. We were told that some specials were to go by. I should think we must have waited there for an hour or more. Anyhow I got sick of it, and passed through the cars on to the rear platform, and down on to the line. I spoke to the guard, and I understood him to say that we should not be starting for at least half an hour. I strolled along the line a little way and stopped to light a pipe. Suddenly I heard a whistle, and when I turned round the rear light of the train was moving away. I shouted and ran as hard as I could, but it was no use. In less than two minutes the train was out of my sight, and I was left alone."

The Duke pushed a small atlas across the table.

"I wonder," he said, "if you could put your finger on about the spot where you were? Here, you see, is the railway line."

Guy studied it for a few moments carefully, and looked at the scale. Then he pointed to a certain spot.

"As near as I could say," he declared, "about there."

The Duke and Monsieur Grisson exchanged quick glances. Guy was beginning to feel a little mystified.

"Proceed, if you please," the Duke said courteously. "I am sure that Monsieur Grisson finds your story most interesting. Permit me."

Guy sipped the *fin champagne* from the glass which the Duke had carefully filled, and took a cigarette from the box at his elbow.

"I found myself," he continued, "in the middle of a dense pine forest, with just sufficient clearing for two lines of rails and no more. There seemed to be nothing for me to do but to walk ahead in the direction which the train had taken. I lit a pipe and started out all right, but I very soon got tired. The sleepers were a long way apart, and the track between frightfully rough. I walked for hours without seeing the slightest sign of a station or a break in the woods, and finally I sat down dead beat. My feet were all blisters, and I felt that I could n't walk another yard. Fortunately it was a warm night, and I made up my mind to crawl under the bracken just inside the wood and go to sleep. I found a comfortable place, and I'd just gone off when a noise close at hand woke me. I sat up and looked around.

"Within a few feet of me an engine and a single carriage had pulled up. At intervals along the line as far as I could see soldiers were stationed like sentries. I could see that they were looking sharply up and down, and even a little way into the wood. From the train three or four men in long cloaks had already descended. They were standing in the track talking together."

For the first time Monsieur Grisson interrupted.

He took his cigar from his mouth and leaned over towards the young Englishman.

"You were lost yourself. You did not accost them? Ask them the way anywhere?"

"It seems odd, I suppose, that I did n't," Guy answered, "but do you know there was an air of secrecy about the whole thing which rather frightened me. And those soldiers had exactly the air of looking for somebody to shoot. Anyhow, while I was hesitating what to do, there was a whistle and another train came from the opposite direction. Then, of course, I waited to see what was going to happen."

"And you saw?" the Duke began.

"I saw another single carriage arrive, more men in long cloaks and more soldiers. There was a brief but hearty greeting between two men, who seemed to be the principals in this little pantomime. Then they both got into the train which had arrived first, and I could see them sitting at a table talking, and a third man, who seemed to be a sort of secretary, was writing all the time. In about half an hour they both stepped back on to the line, and every one commenced shaking hands and saying good-bye. Then the whole thing seemed to melt away. The trains went on, the soldiers climbed into a truck attached to one of them, and everything was just as quiet as before."

"And afterwards?"

"I waited until it was clear daylight, and then I resumed my walk along the line. I found the next station about five miles off, and I was thankful to see that the guard of the train which had left me behind had had the sense to put my luggage out there. I went to the hotel and had some breakfast, and

afterwards I chucked my idea of going so far as the frontier, and left for Vienna. A week later I was in Paris."

The Duke nodded.

"I have asked you this question before," he said "but Monsieur Grisson is anxious to hear it from your own lips. To how many people did you tell this little adventure of yours before you reached Paris?"

"To not a soul!" Guy answered. "I was very dull in Vienna. I found no one who could speak English and my few words of German did me no good at all. I came on to Paris within a week."

The Duke nodded.

"And in Paris for the first time!" he remarked. "You mentioned the affair?"

"Yes! I took up an illustrated paper at a café on the night of my arrival whilst waiting for supper, and saw pictures of two men there who reminded me very much of the two whom I had seen on the railway near Pozen. I think I made some remark out loud which attracted the attention of a woman who was sitting at the next table, and later on I told her the whole story."

"And since then?"

"Since then I have told it to no one."

"Was there any one in the café you have spoken of who seemed to take any particular interest in you?"

Guy considered for a moment.

"There was a young lady from Vienna," he said, "who seemed to want to talk to me."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Madame has justified herself," the Duke murmured.

"She was trying to listen to what I was saying to the English girl — Mademoiselle Flossie, she called herself, and when she went away with her friends she threw me a note with two words on it — '*prenez garde!*' I know it struck me as being rather queer, because ——"

He hesitated. The Duke nodded.

"Go on!" he said.

"Well, I may as well tell you everything," Guy continued, "even if it does sound rather like rot. All the time I was in Vienna and on the journey to Paris I fancied that I was being followed. I kept on seeing the same people, and a man who got in at Strasburg — I had seen him before at the hotel in Vienna — tried all he could to pal up to me. I hate Germans though, and I did n't like the look of the fellow, so I would n't have anything to say to him, though I feel sure he tipped the conductor to put him in my compartment. I gave him the slip at the railway station at Paris, but I 'm almost sure I saw him that night at the Café Montmartre."

"Your story," Monsieur Grisson said quietly, "becomes more and more interesting. Monsieur le Duc here has hinted at some slight indiscretion of yours on the night of your arrival in Paris. I have some influence with the Government here, and I think I can promise you some very substantial help in return for the information you have given us. But I want you to turn your thoughts back to the night you spent by the railroad. Can you remember anything further about it, however trifling, which you have not told us?"

Guy leaned back in his chair and thought for a moment.

"By Jove," he declared, "there is something which I forgot altogether. Just before that little party in the railway saloon broke up the chap in the car who had been writing left his seat, and a loose page of paper fluttered through the window."

The two men leaned across the table almost simultaneously.

"What became of it?" the Duke asked sharply.

"I picked it up and put it in my pocket," Guy answered.

"Did you read it?" the Duke asked.

"I could n't! It was in German!"

"Where is it now?" Monsieur Grisson demanded.

Guy reflected. The faces of the two men amazed him. It was as though great things depended upon his answer.

"It is with my pocketbook and my letter of credit. I remember that I kept it as a curiosity."

"A curiosity!" the Duke exclaimed. "You have it here?"

Guy shook his head.

"It is in my portmanteau!" he answered.

The faces of the two men betrayed their disappointment. They conversed for a few moments in rapid French. Then the Duke turned to Guy.

"You do not object to our sending a trusted person to look through your portmanteau!" he asked. "Monsieur Grisson and I are very curious about that sheet of paper."

"Certainly not," Guy answered. "But may I not have my luggage here?"

The Duke shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "It would not be wise. We

must give Monsieur Grisson time to arrange your little affair."

"I don't want to seem a nuisance," Guy continued, "but about my sister?"

"She has been assured of your safety," the Duke declared. "For the rest we will talk later in the day. Monsieur Grisson and I are going to the telephone. You will find Henri on the terrace."

CHAPTER III

A BODY FROM THE SEINE

"AT the sport, my young friend," Henri murmured, from the depths of his basket chair, "I yield you without question supremacy. Your rude games, trials mostly of brute strength, do not interest me. Your horsemanship I must confess that I envy, and I fear that you are a better shot. But two things remain to me."

"Only two?" Guy murmured. "What unexampled modesty!"

"I can drive a racing automobile at eighty miles an hour, and with the foils I can play with you."

"I give you the first," Guy answered, "but I'm beginning to fancy myself a bit with the sticks. Let's have a bout!"

"My dear Guy," Henri exclaimed, "forgive me, but what a crude suggestion! The first breeze of the day is just coming up from the lake. Close your eyes as I do. Can't you catch the perfume of the roses and the late lilac? Exquisite. In half an hour you will see a new green in the woods there as the sun drops. This is silent joy. You would exchange it for vulgar movement."

"I don't see anything vulgar about fencing," Guy replied. "It's all right here, of course, but I'm getting stiff, and I haven't the appetite of a kitten. I

should like a good hour's bout, a swim afterwards in the baths, and a rub down. Come on, Henri! It 'll make us as fit as possible."

Henri shivered a little.

"My young friend," he murmured, "you move me to despair. How can an alliance between nations with such contrary ideals be possible? You would desert a beautiful scene like this to gain by vulgar exercise an appetite that you may eat. Can't you realize the crudeness of it? Yet I must remember that you are my guest," he added, striking the bell by his side. "Antoine shall prepare my linen clothes, and I will give you a lesson. Antoine," he added, half turning to the manservant who stood by his elbow, "my black linen fencing-clothes and shoes in the dressing-room, and have the floor in the fencing-gallery sprinkled with sand."

The man bowed, and Henri slowly rose from his chair.

"Don't bother about it, you know, if you mind very much," Guy said. "Would you rather have a game of billiards, or a swim in the lake?"

Henri thrust his arm through his friend's.

"By no means," he answered. "If we are to do anything at all we will do the thing in which I excel. It feeds my vanity, which is good for me, for by disposition I am over-modest."

But they were not destined to fence that night, for on their way across the hall the Duke's own servant intercepted them.

"Monsieur le Duc," he announced, "desires to speak with Monsieur in the library."

Henri let go his friend's arm.

"I return to the terrace, *mon ami*," he said. "You

can fetch me when my respected uncle has finished with you."

Monsieur le Duc and Monsieur Grisson were still together. Immediately the door was closed the former turned to Guy.

"Your luggage has been thoroughly searched," he announced, "by a trusty agent. The letter of credit is still there, but the paper of which you spoke is missing."

Guy looked a little incredulous.

"I know it was there the evening I left the hotel," he answered. "It was fastened to my letter of credit by an elastic band. The man you sent must have missed it."

The Duke shook his head.

"That," he said, "is impossible. The paper has been abstracted."

"But who could have known about it?" Guy protested.

"Monsieur Poynton," the Duke said, "we think it well — Monsieur Grisson and I — to take you a little further into our confidence. Has it occurred to you, I wonder, to appreciate the significance of what you saw on the railway in the forest of Pozen?"

"I 'm afraid — not altogether," Guy answered.

"We assumed as much," the Duke said. "What you did see was this. You saw a meeting between the German Emperor and the Czar of Russia. It was marvellously well arranged, and except those interested you were probably the only witness. According to the newspapers they were never less than four hundred miles apart, but on the day in question the Emperor was reported to be confined to his room by a slight chill,

and the Czar to be resting after a fatiguing journey. You understand that this meeting was meant to be kept a profound secret?"

Guy nodded.

"But why?" he asked. "Was there any special reason why they should not meet?"

"My young friend," the Duke answered gravely, "this meeting of which you were the only witness might, but for your chance presence there, have altered the destiny of Europe. Try how you will you cannot appreciate its far-reaching possibilities. I will endeavor to give you the bare outlines of the affair. Even you, I suppose, have observed or heard of the growing friendship between my country and yours, which has culminated in what is called the *entente cordiale*."

"Yes, I know as much as that," Guy admitted.

"This movement," the Duke said, "has been looked upon with growing distaste and disfavor in Russia. Russia is the traditional and inevitable enemy of your country. Russia had, I may go so far as to say, made up her mind for war with England very soon after her first reverses at the hands of Japan. I am telling you now what is a matter of common knowledge amongst diplomatists when I tell you that it was the attitude of my country — of France — which alone has stayed her hand."

"This is very interesting," Guy said, "even to me, who have never taken any interest in politics, but ——"

"Wait! Russia, as I say, found us indisposed to back her in any quarrel with England. She turned then, of course, to Germany. We became aware, through our secret service, that something was on foot between the

two countries. With our utmost vigilance we were unable to obtain any particulars. It is you, Monsieur Poynton, who have brought us the first information of a definite character."

Guy looked his amazement, but he said nothing.

"To you," the Duke continued, "a secret meeting between these two monarchs may not seem at all an astonishing thing. To us it is of the gravest political importance. Some sort of an understanding was arrived at between them. What was it? That sheet of paper which was once in your possession might very possibly contain the clue. Now you can appreciate its importance to us."

"What an ass I was not to take more care of it!" Guy muttered.

"There are other things to be considered," the Duke continued. "For the last month every dockyard in Germany has been working night and day, and we have authentic information as to a huge mobilization scheme which is already on foot. We might have wondered against whom these preparations were intended but for you. As it is, the English Government has been fully apprised of everything. Your magnificent fleet, under the pretext of seeing the Baltic Squadron safely on its way, has been gradually concentrated. From despatches to the German Ambassador which we have managed to intercept in England, we know that it is intended to raise a *casus belli* during the presence of the squadron in British waters. Quite unexpectedly, as it was hoped, Germany was to range herself on Russia's side and strike against England. We, Russia's nominal ally, have had no intimation of this whatever. We are apparently left to ourselves—

ignored. Our friendship with your country has destroyed Russia's friendship for us. She relies no doubt on our neutrality, and she makes terms, doubtless absurdly favorable ones, with our ancient enemy. In the eyes of the world France is to be made to appear ridiculous. The German Empire is to be ruled from London, and the Emperor Wilhelm's known ambition is to be realized."

"It sounds," Guy admitted, "like a nightmare. I know you foreigners all think we English are a lot too cock-sure, but we have our own ideas, you know, about any attempt at invasion."

"I am afraid," the Duke said, "that when it comes to throwing a million men at different points of your coasts protected by a superb navy you might find yourselves unpleasantly surprised. But let that pass. Have I said enough to make you understand the importance of what you saw in the forest of Pozen? Good! Now I want you to understand this. In the interests of your country and mine it is most important that the fact of our knowledge of this meeting should be kept a profound secret."

"Yes," Guy said, "I understand that."

"Your presence there," the Duke continued, "created a certain amount of suspicion. You were watched to Paris by German spies, and if they had had the least idea of how much you had seen your life would not have been worth five minutes' purchase. As it is they are uneasy over your disappearance. There are at least a dozen men and women in Paris and England to-day who are searching for you! You are moderately safe here, but not altogether. I want to put them finally off the scent. I might, of course, put

you into such confinement that detection would be impossible. I do not want to do that. You have rendered your own country and mine an immense service. I prefer to treat you as a gentleman and a man of honor, and to take you, as I hope you will see that I have done, into our entire confidence."

"Monsieur le Duc," Guy answered, "I can assure you that I appreciate all that you have said. I am willing to do exactly as you say."

"To-morrow morning's papers," the Duke said slowly, "will contain an account of the finding of your body in the Seine."

"My what!" Guy exclaimed.

"Your body! We are going to stab and drown you. Perhaps I should say we are going to discover you stabbed and drowned."

Guy half rose from his seat.

"I say ——" he began.

"I need not explain, of course," the Duke continued, "that you will suffer by proxy. The whole affair has been carefully arranged by the commissioners of police.

"An account of your doings since you arrived in Paris will be given, which I fear may not flatter you, but you must remember that it is necessary to put our German friends completely off the scent, and in a month's time or so you will reappear, and everything will be contradicted."

"But my sister?" Guy exclaimed.

"Concerning your sister," the Duke continued, "we have further explanations, perhaps I should say apologies, to offer you at some future time. For the present — this only. She is now in Paris. She is to some extent in our confidence, and you shall see her within the next few days."

"And what are you going to do with me really?" Guy asked.

"You will remain here. Half the servants of the household have been dismissed, and every one who is not absolutely trustworthy has been got rid of. We are in close consultation with your English Cabinet, and the moment the time arrives for us to disclose our knowledge of these secrets you will be free to go where you please."

"Absolutely free?" Guy asked anxiously.

"Certainly!" the Duke answered. "The other little affair is cancelled by your present services. In fact, as regards that, you need not give yourself another moment's anxiety."

A small telephone which stood upon the table rang sharply. The Duke exchanged a few sentences and replaced the receiver. He turned to Guy.

"It is an affair of the tides," he said. "Your body was washed up this afternoon, six hours before time. It will be in the evening papers. Ah!"

The telephone rang again. This time it was Monsieur Grisson who was required. He listened for a moment or two with inscrutable countenance. Then he glanced at the clock.

"The Russian Ambassador," he said, replacing the receiver, "desires an immediate interview with me on a matter of the utmost importance — and the Russian Fleet has left the Baltic!"

CHAPTER IV

THE INSOLENCE OF MADAME LA MARQUISE

DUNCOMBE was passed from the concierge to a footman, and from a footman to a quietly dressed groom of the chambers, who brought him at last to Madame la Marquise. She gave him the tips of her fingers and a somewhat inquiring gaze.

"Sir George Duncombe, is it not?" she remarked. "I am not receiving this afternoon, but your message was so urgent. Forgive me, but it was not by any chance my husband whom you wished to see?"

"Your husband would have done as well, Madame," Duncombe answered bluntly, "but I learned that he was not at home. My visit is really to Miss Poynton. I should be exceedingly obliged if you would allow me the privilege of a few minutes' conversation with her."

The forehead of the Marquise was wrinkled with surprise. She stood amidst all the wonders of her magnificent drawing-room like a dainty Dresden doll — petite, cold, dressed to perfection. Her manner and her tone were alike frigid.

"But, Monsieur," she said, "that is wholly impossible. Mademoiselle is too thoroughly upset by the terrible news in the paper this morning. It is unheard of. Monsieur may call again if he is a friend of Mademoiselle Poynton's — say, in a fortnight."

"Marquise," he said, "it is necessary that I see Mademoiselle at once. I am the bearer of good news."

The Marquise looked at him steadily.

"Of good news, Monsieur?"

"Certainly!"

"But how can that be?"

"If Madame will give me the opportunity," he said, "I should only be too glad to explain — to Mademoiselle Poynton."

"If, indeed, it should be good news," the Marquise said slowly, "it were better broken gradually to Mademoiselle. I will take her a message."

"Permit me to see her, Marquise," he begged. "My errand is indeed important."

She shook her head.

"It is not," she said, "according to the *convenances.* Mademoiselle is under my protection. I have not the honor of knowing you, Monsieur."

Duncombe raised his eyebrows.

"But you remember calling at my house in Norfolk, and bringing Miss Poynton away," he said.

She stared at him calmly.

"The matter," she said, "has escaped my memory. I do not love your country, Monsieur, and my rare visits there do not linger in my mind."

"Your husband," he reminded her, "asked me to visit you here."

"My husband's friends," she replied, "are not mine."

The calm insolence of her manner towards him took him aback. He had scarcely expected such a reception.

"I can only apologize, Madame," he said with a bow,

"for intruding. I will await your husband's return in the hall."

He bowed low, and turned to leave the room. He had almost reached the door before she stopped him.

"Wait!"

He turned round. Her voice was different.

"Come and sit down here," she said, pointing to a sofa by her side.

He obeyed her, thoroughly amazed. She leaned back amongst the cushions and looked at him thoughtfully.

"How is it that you — an Englishman — speak French so well?" she asked.

"I lived in Paris for some years," he answered.

"Indeed! And yet you returned to — Norfolk, is it?"

He bowed.

"It is true, Madame!" he admitted.

"How droll!" she murmured. "Miss Poynton — she is an old friend of yours?"

"I am very anxious to see her, Madame!"

"Why?"

He hesitated. After all, his was no secret mission.

"I have reason to believe," he said, "that a mistake has been made in the identity of the body found in the Seine and supposed to be her brother's."

She gave a little start. It seemed to him that from that moment she regarded him with more interest.

"But that, Monsieur," she said, "is not possible."

"Why not?"

She did not answer him for a moment. Instead she rang a bell.

A servant appeared almost immediately.

"Request Monsieur le Marquis to step this way immediately he returns," she ordered.

The man bowed and withdrew. The Marquise turned again to Duncombe.

"It is quite impossible!" she repeated. "Do you know who it was that identified — the young man?"

Duncombe shook his head.

"I know nothing," he said. "I saw the notice in the paper, and I have been to the Morgue with a friend."

"Were you allowed to see it?"

"No! For some reason or other we were not. But we managed to bribe one of the attendants, and we got the police description."

"This," Madame said, "is interesting. Well?"

"There was one point in particular in the description," Duncombe said, "and a very important one, which proved to us both that the dead man was not Guy Poynton."

"It is no secret, I presume?" she said. "Tell me what it was."

Duncombe hesitated. He saw no reason for concealing the facts.

"The height of the body," he said, "was given as five feet nine. Guy Poynton was over six feet."

The Marquise nodded her head slowly.

"And now," she said, "shall I tell you who it is who identified the body at the Morgue — apart from the papers which were found in his pocket, and which certainly belonged to Mr. Poynton?"

"I should be interested to know," he admitted.

"It was Miss Poynton herself. It is that which has upset her so. She recognized him at once."

"Are you sure of this, Madame?" Duncombe asked.

"I myself," the Marquise answered, "accompanied her there. It was terrible."

Duncombe looked very grave.

"I am indeed sorry to hear this," he said. "There can be no possibility of any mistake, then?"

"None whatever!" the Marquise declared.

"You will permit me to see her?" Duncombe begged. "If I am not a very old friend — I am at least an intimate one."

The Marquise shook her head.

"She is not in a fit state to see any one," she declared. "The visit to the Morgue has upset her almost as much as the affair itself. You must have patience, Monsieur. In a fortnight or three weeks at the earliest she may be disposed to see friends. Certainly not at present."

"I may send her a message?" Duncombe asked.

The Marquise nodded.

"Yes. You may write it, if you like."

"And I may wait for an answer?"

"Yes."

Duncombe scribbled a few lines on the back of a visiting-card. The Marquise took it from him and rose.

"I will return," she said. "You shall be entirely satisfied."

She left him alone for nearly ten minutes. She had scarcely left the room when another visitor entered.

The Vicomte de Bergillac, in a dark brown suit and an apple-green tie, bowed to Duncombe, and carefully selected the most comfortable chair in his vicinity.

"So you took my advice, Monsieur," he remarked, helping himself to a cushion from another chair, and placing it behind his head.

"I admit it," Duncombe answered. "On the whole I believe that it was very good advice."

"Would you," the Vicomte murmured, "like another dose?"

"I trust," Duncombe said, "that there is no necessity."

The Vicomte reflected.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"To see Miss Poynton."

"And again why?"

Duncombe smiled. The boy's manner was so devoid of impertinence that he found it impossible to resent his questions.

"Well," he said, "I came hoping to bring Miss Poynton some good news. I had information which led me seriously to doubt whether the body which has been found in the Seine is really her brother's."

The Vicomte sat up as though he had been shot.

"My friend," he said slowly, "I take some interest in you, but, upon my word, I begin to believe that you will end your days in the Morgue yourself. As you value your life, don't tell any one else what you have told me. I trust that I am the first."

"I have told the Marquise," Duncombe answered, "and she has gone to find out whether Miss Poynton will see me."

The Vicomte's patent boot tapped the floor slowly.

"You have told the Marquise," he repeated thoughtfully. "Stop! I must think!"

There was a short silence. Then the Vicomte looked up.

"Very well," he said. "Now listen! Have you any confidence in me?"

"Undoubtedly," Duncombe answered. "The advice you gave me before was, I know, good. It was confirmed a few hours following, and, as you know, I followed it."

"Then listen," the Vicomte said. "*L'affaire Poynton* is in excellent hands. The young lady will come to no harm. You are here, I know, because you are her friend. You can help her if you will."

"How?" Duncombe asked.

"By leaving Paris to-day."

"Your advice," Duncombe said grimly, "seems to lack variety."

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders.

"The other affair," he said, "is still open. If I stepped to the telephone here you would be arrested within the hour."

"Can't you leave the riddles out and talk so that an ordinary man can understand you for a few minutes?" Duncombe begged.

"It is exactly what remains impossible," the Vicomte answered smoothly. "But you know the old saying, you have doubtless something similar in your own country, 'It is from our friends we suffer most.' Your pres-

ence here, your — forgive me — somewhat clumsy attempts to solve this *affaire Poynton*, are likely to be a cause of embarrassment to the young lady herself and to others. Apart from that, it will certainly cost you your life."

"Without some shadow of an explanation," Duncombe said calmly, "I remain where I am in case I can be of assistance to Miss Poynton."

The young man shrugged his shoulders, and sauntering to a mirror rearranged his tie. Madame la Marquise entered.

"You, Henri!" she exclaimed.

He bowed low with exaggerated grace, and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"I!" he answered. "And — for this time with a perfectly legitimate reason for my coming. A commission from my uncle."

"*L'affaire Poynton?*"

"Exactly, dear cousin."

"But why," she asked, "did they not show you into my room?"

"I learnt that my friend Sir George Duncombe was here, and I desired to see him," he rejoined.

She shrugged her dainty shoulders.

"You will wait!" she directed. Then she turned to Duncombe, and handed him a sealed envelope.

"If you please," she said, "will you read that — now."

He tore it open, and read the few hasty lines. Then he looked up, and met the Marquise's expectant gaze.

"Madame," he said slowly, "does this come from Miss Poynton of her own free will?"

She laughed insolently.

"Monsieur," she said, "my guests are subject to no coercion in this house."

He bowed, and turned towards the door.

"Your answer, Monsieur?" she called out.

"There is no answer," he replied.

CHAPTER V

THE INTERVIEWING OF PHYLLIS

THE Marquise made a wry face at his departing figure, which changed swiftly into a smile as she turned to the young Vicomte.

"Ah, these Englishmen!" she exclaimed. "These dull, good, obstinate, stupid pigs of Englishmen! If they would lose their tempers once — get angry, anything. Do they make love as coldly, I wonder?"

"Dear cousin," he answered, "I do not know. But if you will permit me I will show you ——"

"Henri!"

He sighed.

"You are so adorable, Angèle," he murmured.

"And you," she answered, "are so indiscreet. It is not your day, and I am expecting Gustav at any moment. I have left word that he is to be shown up here. There, my hand for one moment, not so roughly, sir. And now tell me why you came."

"On a diplomatic errand, my dear cousin. I must see Miss Poynton."

She touched a bell.

"I will send for her," she said. "I shall not let you see her alone. She is much too good-looking, and you are far too impressionable!"

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Angèle," he said, "you speak so of a young Eng-

lish miss — to me, Henri de Bergillac — to me who have known — who knows ——"

She interrupted him laughing. The exaggerated devotion of his manner seemed to amuse her.

"My dear Henri!" she said. "I do not believe that even a young English miss is safe from you. But attend! She comes."

Phyllis entered the room and came towards them. She was dressed in black, and she was still pale, but her eyes and mouth were wholly without affinity to the class of young person whom Henri had expected to see. He rose and bowed, and Phyllis regarded him with frank interest.

"Phyllis," the Marquise said, "this is the Vicomte de Bergillac, and he brings you messages from some one or other. Your affairs are quite too complicated for my little head. Sit down and let him talk to you."

"If Monsieur le Vicomte has brought me messages from the right person," Phyllis said with a smile, "he will be very welcome. Seriously, Monsieur, I seem to have fallen amongst friends here whose only unkindness is an apparent desire to turn my life into a maze. I hope that you are going to lead me out."

"I can conceive, Mademoiselle," the Vicomte answered with his hand upon his heart, "no more delightful undertaking."

"Then I am quite sure," she answered, laughing softly, "that we are both going to be very happy. Please go on!"

"Mademoiselle speaks delightful French," he murmured, a little surprised.

"And, Monsieur, I can see," she answered, "is an

apt flatterer. Afterwards as much as you please. But now — well, I want to hear about Guy."

"Mademoiselle has commanded," he said with a little gesture. "To proceed then. Monsieur Guy is well, and is my constant companion. He is with friends who wish him well, and this morning, Mademoiselle, the President himself has given written orders to the police to proceed no further in the unfortunate little affair of which Mademoiselle has knowledge."

Phyllis had lost all her pallor. She smiled delightfully upon him. Madame la Marquise rose with a little impatient movement, and walked to the further end of the room.

"How nice of you to come and tell me this," she exclaimed, "and what a relief! I am sure I think he is very fortunate to have made such good friends."

"Mademoiselle," he declared with emphasis, "one at least of those friends is more than repaid."

She laughed back into his eyes, frankly amused by his gallantry.

"And now," she said, "we come to the beginning of the riddles. Why is it necessary for him to be supposed drowned, if he is no longer in danger from the police?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle," he said, "I must speak to you now of strange things. But, first, I must implore you to promise me this, and remember it always. Every word that I am going to say to you now must remain for the present a profound secret. That is agreed?"

"Certainly!" she answered.

"Your brother," he continued, "in his travels on the Continent stumbled by chance upon a State secret

of international importance. He had himself no idea of it, but a chance word which he let fall, on the first evening I met him, gave the clue to myself and some friends. In his enforced retirement we — that is, my uncle and others — learned from him the whole story of his adventure. It has placed the Government of this country under great obligations. This, together with your service to us, has secured his pardon."

"This is wonderful!" she murmured.

"It is not all," he continued. "The spies of the country where he learnt this secret have followed him to Paris. They are to-day searching for him everywhere. If they knew that he realized the importance of what he had seen, and had communicated it to the proper persons here, our advantage in knowing it would be largely lost. So far they have not traced him. Now, I think that you have the key to what must have puzzled you so much."

"This is wonderful!" she murmured. "Let me think for a moment."

"You are naturally anxious," the Vicomte continued, "to see your brother. Before very long, Mademoiselle, I trust that it may be my pleasure to bring you together. But when I tell you that you are watched continually in the hope that, through you, your brother's hiding-place may be found, you will understand the wisdom which for the present keeps you apart."

"I suppose so," she answered dubiously. "But now that his death is reported?"

"Exactly, Mademoiselle. The affair has been arranged so that the search for your brother will be abandoned and the espionage on you removed. If the story of his

doings in Paris, and the tragic sequel to them, be believed by those whom we wish to believe it, then they will also assume that his secret has died with him, and that their schemes move on towards success. You understand?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Vicomte, I understand," she answered slowly. "What, then, do you wish me to do?"

"Mademoiselle," the Vicomte answered, fixing his dark eyes impressively upon her, "for you there remains the hardest of all tasks — inaction. Believe me that when I came here, it was not my intention to put the truth of the matter so plainly before you. Neither was it the will of those whose orders I carry out. But I, Mademoiselle, before all things, I believe in inspiration. I find in Mademoiselle" — he bowed once more — "qualities which alter the situation. I — a judge of faces as I venture to believe myself — have looked into yours, and many things have happened."

She laughed delightfully. Her eyes were lit with humor.

"Ah, Monsieur!" she protested.

"With you, Mademoiselle," he continued, "reposes now a secret of great importance to your country and mine. I ask for no pledge of discretion, but I rely upon it. And, especially, Mademoiselle, may I warn you against your friends?"

"I understand," she answered. "You wish me to share this confidence with no one."

"With no one," the Vicomte repeated impressively. "Not even, Mademoiselle, if I may venture to mention a name, with your very persistent admirer, Sir George Duncombe, whom I saw here a few moments since."

She sighed, and the Vicomte's face became one of pale anxiety.

"I have not been permitted to see him," she answered. "He was here a few minutes ago."

"It is wiser so, Mademoiselle," the Vicomte said. "I wonder," he added, "whether Mademoiselle will pardon the impertinence of a purely personal question?"

"I will try," she answered demurely.

"This Englishman — Sir George Duncombe — are you perhaps — how you say, betrothed to him?"

A certain bluntness in the question, and the real or affected anxiety of the young man's tone brought the color streaming into her cheeks.

"Monsieur," she exclaimed, "you really must not ——"

"Ah, but, Mademoiselle," he interrupted, "so much depends upon your answer."

"Absurd!" she murmured. "I really do not see why I should answer such a question at all."

"You will be merciful?" he begged, lowering his tone.

"I will," she answered. "I hope you will appreciate my confidence. I am not engaged to Sir George Duncombe."

His sigh of relief was marvellous. She found it harder than ever to keep the laughter from her eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he declared, "it makes me happy to have you say this."

"Really, Vicomte!" she protested.

"The situation, too," he said, "becomes less complex. We can very easily deal with him now. He shall annoy you no more!"

"But he does n't annoy me," she answered calmly.

"On the contrary I should like to see him very much, if I were permitted."

"Mademoiselle will understand well the indiscretion," he said earnestly.

She sighed a little wearily.

"I am afraid," she said, "that I find it a little hard to understand anything clearly, but you see that I trust you. I will not see him."

"Mademoiselle is very wise," he answered. "Indeed, it is better not. There remains now a question which I have come to ask."

"Well?"

"Mademoiselle did not by chance whilst waiting for her brother think of examining his luggage?"

She nodded.

"I did look through it," she admitted.

"There was a paper there, which is missing now — a sheet of paper with writing on it — in German. It is not possible that Mademoiselle took possession of it?" he demanded eagerly.

She nodded.

"That is just what I did do," she said. "I could read a few words, and I could not understand how it came to be in his bag. It seemed to be part of an official agreement between two countries."

"You have it now?" he cried eagerly. "You have it in your possession?"

She shook her head

"I gave it to some one to take care of," she said, "when I was over in England. I got frightened when we were nearly caught at Runton, and I did not want it to be found upon me."

"To whom?" he cried.

"To Sir George Duncombe!"

The Vicomte was silent for a moment.

"You believe," he asked, "that Sir George Duncombe would guard it carefully?"

"I am sure he would," she answered.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "this is very important. Your brother's luggage has been searched, and we came to the conclusion that the paper had been taken by those who had followed him here, and may possibly have been aware that he had it. If we can get possession of it, it will be very much to the advantage of your country and mine. I scarcely dare say more. Will you give me a letter to Sir George instructing him to deliver it up to me?"

She leaned a little forward and looked steadily into his eyes.

"Monsieur le Vicomte," she said, "I do not know you very well, and it is very hard indeed for me to tell who are my friends here. Can I trust you?"

"Mademoiselle," he answered, "I will not say 'like your brother,' for it is a relationship I have no wish to bear. Let me say like the person to whom your welfare is dearer even than his own."

Phyllis felt her lips curve into a smile. Despite his youth and manner, which seemed to her a little affected, there was nevertheless undoubted earnestness in the admiration which he took no pains to conceal.

"Very well, Monsieur le Vicomte," she said, "I will give you the letter."

CHAPTER VI

THE BLUNDERING OF ANDREW

THEY came face to face in the hall of the Grand Hotel. Duncombe had just returned from his call upon the Marquise. Andrew was leaning upon the arm of a dark, smooth-shaven man, and had apparently just descended from the lift. At the sound of Duncombe's little exclamation they both stopped short. Andrew turned his heavily spectacled eyes in Duncombe's direction, but it was obvious that he saw nothing.

"You here, Andrew!"

"Yes! Why not?"

The tone was curt, almost discourteous. Duncombe understood at once.

"Let us sit down somewhere, and talk for a few minutes," he said. "I did not expect you. You should have let me know that you were coming."

Andrew laughed a little bitterly.

"I scarcely see why," he said. "To tell you the truth, I see no advantage to either of us in any intercourse."

Duncombe took him by the arm and led him towards the smoking-room.

"Andrew," he said, "perhaps I have behaved badly — at least from your point of view, but remember that I warned you. Let us sit down here. Who is your friend?"

"Never mind," Andrew answered. "You can say what you have to before him. He is in my confidence."

Duncombe glanced around. The man had taken the chair next to them, and was evidently prepared to listen to all that was said. His clothes and bearing, and quiet, unobtrusive manners, all seemed to suggest truthfully enough his possible identity — an English detective from an advertised office. Duncombe smiled as he realized the almost pitiful inadequacy of such methods.

"Come, Andrew," he said, turning to his friend, "you have a small grievance against me, and you think you have a great one."

"A small grievance!" Andrew murmured softly. "Thank you, Duncombe."

"Go on, then. State it!" Duncombe declared. "Let me hear what is in your mind."

Andrew raised his brows slowly. Twice he seemed to speak, but at the last moment remained silent. He was obviously struggling to control himself.

"There is this in my mind against you, Duncombe," he said finally. "I sent for you as a friend. You accepted a charge from me — as my friend. And you betrayed me."

Duncombe shook his head.

"Listen, Andrew," he said. "I want to remind you again of what I said just now. I warned you! No, don't interrupt. It may have sounded like nonsense to you. I meant every word I said. I honestly tried to make you understand. I came here; I risked many things. I failed! I returned to England. Up till then you had nothing to complain of. Then, Heaven knows why, but the very girl whom I had gone to

Paris to seek came to Runton in the guise at least of an adventuress."

Andrew lifted his head quickly.

"You admit it at last, then?" he cried.

"Yes, I admit it now," Duncombe agreed.

"You lied to me there — to me who had no eyes, who trusted you. What was that but betrayal, rank, inexcusable betrayal!"

"Listen, Andrew," Duncombe said. "She told me that she was not Phyllis Poynton. It was enough for me. I disregarded my convictions. Her word was my law. She said that she was not Phyllis Poynton, and to me she never was Phyllis Poynton. She was afraid of you, and I helped her to avoid you. I admit it! It is the extent of my failing in our friendship, and you were warned."

"And now?"

"I am here now," Duncombe said a little sadly, "because I love her, and because I cannot keep away. But she will not see me, and I am no nearer solving the mystery than ever. On the contrary, I know that I am in danger here. It is possible that I may be driven to leave Paris to-night."

"You know where she is now?"

"Yes."

Andrew leaned suddenly over, and his grip was on Duncombe's shoulder like a vise.

"Then, by God, you shall tell me!" he said fiercely. "Don't you know, man, that Guy has been found in the Seine, robbed and drugged, and murdered without a doubt? Do you want me to wait whilst something of the same sort happens to her? You shall tell me where she is, Duncombe. I say that you shall tell me!"

Duncombe hesitated.

"You can do no more than I have done," he said.

"Then at least I will do as much," Andrew answered. "I am her oldest friend, and I have claims upon her which you never could have. Now that she is in this terrible trouble my place is by her side. I ——"

"One moment, Andrew," Duncombe interrupted. "Are you sure that it was Guy Poynton who was found in the Seine? The height was given as five feet nine, and Guy Poynton was over six feet."

"You should read the papers," Andrew answered shortly. "He was identified by his sister."

"The papers said so," Duncombe answered hesitatingly; "but ——"

"Look here," Andrew interrupted, "I have had enough of this playing with facts. You have grown too complex about this business altogether, Duncombe. Give me Phyllis Poynton's address."

"You shall have it," Duncombe answered, taking a leaf from his pocketbook and writing. "I don't think that it will be any good to you. I think that it is more likely to lead you into trouble. Miss Poynton is with the Marquis and Marquise de St. Ethol. They are of the first nobility in France. Their position as people of honor and circumstance appears undoubted. But nevertheless, if you are allowed to see her I shall be surprised."

The hall-porter approached them, hat in hand.

"A lady to see Monsieur," he announced to Andrew.

Andrew rose and took his companion's arm. He scarcely glanced again towards Duncombe, who followed them out of the room. And there in the hall awaiting

"'You are on the brink of making an idiot of yourself,' Duncombe answered."

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them was the young lady from Vienna, quietly dressed in black, but unmistakable with her pretty hair and perfumes. Duncombe watched them shake hands and move away before he could recover sufficiently from his first fit of surprise to intervene. Then a realization of what had happened rushed in upon him. They, too, then, had been to the Café Montmartre, with their obvious Anglicisms, their clumsy inquiries — to make of themselves without doubt the jest of that little nest of intriguers, and afterwards their tool. Duncombe thought of the fruits of his own inquiries there, and shivered. He hurried after the little party, who were apparently on their way to the café.

"Andrew," he said, grasping him by the arm, "I must speak with you alone — at once."

"I see no object in any further discussion between us," Andrew said calmly.

"Don't be a fool!" Duncombe answered. "That woman you are with is a spy. If you have anything to do with her you are injuring Phyllis Poynton. She is not here to give you information. She is at work for her own ends."

"You are becoming more communicative, my friend," Andrew said, with something which was almost a sneer. "You did not talk so freely a few minutes back. It seems as though we were on the eve of a discovery."

"You are on the brink of making an idiot of yourself," Duncombe answered quickly. "You were mad to bring that blundering English detective over here. What the French police cannot or do not choose to discover, do you suppose that they would allow an Englishman to find out — a stranger to Paris, and with an accent

like that? If I cannot keep you from folly by any other means I must break my word to others. Come back into the smoking-room with me, and I will tell you why you are mad to have anything to do with that woman."

"Thank you," Andrew answered, "I think not. I have confidence in Mr. Lloyd, my friend here, and I have none in you."

"Andrew!"

"I speak as I feel!"

"Leave me out of the question, It is Phyllis Poynton you will harm. I see that your friend is listening, and Mademoiselle is impatient. Make your excuses for ten minutes, Andrew. You will never regret it."

The detective, who had evidently overheard everything, stepped back to them.

"You will excuse my interfering, sir," he said, "but if this case is to remain in my hands at all it is necessary for me to hear all that Sir George Duncombe has to say. The young lady will wait for a moment. This case is difficult enough as it is, what with the jealousy of the French police, who naturally don't want us to find out what they can't. If Sir George Duncombe has any information to give now," the man added with emphasis, "which he withheld a few minutes ago, I think that I ought to hear it from his own lips."

"I agree entirely with what Mr. Lloyd has said," Andrew declared.

Duncombe shrugged his shoulders. He looked around him cautiously, but they were in a corner of the entresol, and no one was within hearing distance.

"Very well," he said. "To save you from danger, and Miss Poynton from further trouble, I am going to break a confidence which has been reposed in me, and to give you the benefit of my own surmises. In the first place, Mr. Lloyd is mistaken in supposing that the French police have been in the least puzzled by this double disappearance. On the contrary, they are perfectly well aware of all the facts of the case, and could have produced Miss Poynton or her brother at any moment. They are working not for us, but against us!"

"Indeed!" Mr. Lloyd said in a tone of disbelief. "And their object?"

"Here is as much of the truth as I dare tell you," Duncombe said. "Guy Poynton whilst on the Continent became the chance possessor of an important State secret. He was followed to France by spies from that country — we will call it Germany — and the young lady who awaits you so impatiently is, if not one of them, at least one of their friends. At the Café Montmartre he gave his secret away to people who are in some measure allied with the secret service police of France. He was kidnapped by them, and induced to remain hidden by a trick. Meanwhile diplomacy makes use of his information, and foreign spies look for him in vain. His sister, when she came to search for him, was simply an inconvenience which these people had not contemplated. She was worked upon by fears concerning her brother's safety to go into hiding. Both have been well cared for, and the report of Guy's death is, I firmly believe, nothing but an attempt to lull the anxieties of the spies who are searching for him. This young woman here may be able to tell you into whose hands

he has fallen, but you may take my word for it that she is in greater need of information than you are, and that she is an exceedingly dangerous person for you to discuss the Poyntons with. There are the crude facts. I have only known them a few hours myself, and there is a good deal which I cannot explain. But this I honestly and firmly believe. Neither you nor I nor Mr. Lloyd here can do the slightest good by interfering in this matter. For myself, I am leaving for England to-night."

Duncombe, like most honest men, expected to be believed. If he had entertained the slightest doubt about it he would not have dared to open his mouth. The silence that followed he could understand. No doubt they were as amazed as he had been. But it was a different thing when he saw the expression on Andrew's face as he turned to his companion.

"What do you think of this, Lloyd?" he asked.

"I am afraid, sir," the man answered, "that some of the clever ones have been imposing upon Sir George. It generally turns out so when amateurs tackle a job like this."

Duncombe looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that you don't believe me?" he exclaimed.

"I would n't put it like that, sir," the man answered with a deprecating smile. "I think you have been misled by those who did not wish you to discover the truth."

Duncombe turned sharply on his heel.

"And you, Andrew?"

"I wish to do you justice," Andrew answered coldly, "and I am willing to believe that you have faith your-

self in the extraordinary story you have just told us. But frankly I think that you have been too credulous."

Duncombe lost his temper. He turned on his heel, and walked back into the hotel.

"You can go to the devil your own way!" he declared.

CHAPTER VII

SPENCER GETS HIS CHANCE

SPENCER tried to rise from the sofa, but the effort was too much for him. Pale and thin, with black lines under his eyes, and bloodless lips, he seemed scarcely more than the wreck of his former self.

His visitor laid his stick and hat upon the table. Then he bowed once more to Spencer, and stood looking at him, leaning slightly against the table.

"I am permitted," he asked gently, "to introduce myself?"

"Quite unnecessary!" Spencer answered.

The Baron shrugged his shoulders.

"You know me?" he asked.

The shadow of a smile flitted across Spencer's face.

"By many names, Monsieur Louis," he answered.

His visitor smiled. Debonair in dress and deportment, there seemed nothing to inspire alarm in the air of gentle concern with which he regarded the man whom he had come to visit. Yet Spencer cursed the languor which had kept him from recovering the revolver which an hour or more before had slipped from underneath his cushion.

"It saves trouble," Monsieur Louis said. "I come to you, Monsieur Spencer, as a friend."

"You alarm me," Spencer murmured.

Monsieur Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"You are pleased to be witty," he answered. "But indeed I am no such terrible person. It is permitted that I smoke?"

"Certainly," Spencer answered. "If you care for wine or liqueurs pray ring for my servant. I can assure you that it is not by my own will that you find me so indifferent a host."

"I thank you," Monsieur Louis answered. "I think that we will not ring the bell. It would be a pity to disturb an interview to which I have looked forward with so much pleasure."

"*L'affaire Poynton?*" Spencer suggested.

"Precisely!"

"You have perhaps come to complete the little affair in which so far you have succeeded so admirably?"

"Pray do not suggest such a thing," Monsieur Louis answered deprecatingly. "For one thing I should not personally run the risk. And for another have I not already assured you that I come as a friend?"

"It was then," Spencer answered, "that I began to be frightened."

Monsieur Louis smiled. He drew a gold cigarette case from his pocket, and calmly lit a cigarette.

"Since you permit, *mon ami*," he said. "Good! I speak better when I smoke. You are not so ill, I see, but that you retain that charming sense of humor your readers have learnt so well how to appreciate."

"The dose was scarcely strong enough," Spencer answered. "Or perhaps by good fortune I stumbled upon the proper antidote."

"I see that you like plain speaking," Monsieur Louis continued with a gentle smile. "Permit me to assure you then that the dose was quite as strong as we wished.

Extremes are sometimes necessary, but we avoid them whenever possible."

"I wonder where it happened," Spencer said reflectively. "I have been on my guard all the time. I have watched my wine and coffee at the cafés, and I have eaten only in the restaurants that I know."

Monsieur Louis did not seem to think the matter important.

"It was bound to happen," he said. "If you had been like your friends — the English baronet and the last two, who are even more amusing — perhaps it would not have been necessary. But you understand — you were beginning to discover things."

"Yes," Spencer admitted. "I was beginning to get interested."

"Exactly! We were forced to act. I can assure you, Monsieur Spencer, that it was with reluctance. The others of whom I have spoken — Sir George Duncombe, Monsieur Pelham, and his toy detective — forgive me that I smile — walk all the time in the palm of our hand. But they remain unharmed. If by any chance they should blunder into the knowledge of things which might cause us annoyance, why, then — there would be more invalids in Paris. Indeed, Monsieur, we do not seek to abuse our power. My errand to you to-day is one of mercy."

"You make me ashamed," Spencer said, with a sarcasm which he took no pains to conceal, "of my unworthy suspicions. To proceed."

"You have sent for Sir George Duncombe to come and see you!"

Spencer was silent for a moment. His own servant unfaithful? It was not possible.

"Well?"

"Even you," the Baron continued, "have not yet solved the mystery of *l'affaire Poynton*. But you know more than Sir George. Let me recommend that you do not share your knowledge with him."

"Why not?"

"If you do Sir George will at once share your indisposition."

"I begin to understand," Spencer said.

"How otherwise? Send Sir George home. You see the delicacy of our position. It is not so much that we fear Sir George Duncombe's interference, but he again is followed and watched over by our enemies, who would easily possess themselves of any information which he might gain."

Spencer nodded.

"It is good reasoning," he admitted.

"Listen," Monsieur Louis continued. "I speak now on behalf of my friends. You know whom I mean. You have solved the mystery of our existence. We are omnipotent. The police and the secret service police and the Government itself are with us. We have license throughout the city. We may do what others may not. For us there is no crime. I kill you now perhaps. The police arrive. I am before the Commissioner. I give him the sign — it is *l'affaire Poynton*. I go free! It is a certain thing."

"Granted!" Spencer said. "Proceed with your killing, or your argument."

"With the latter, if you please," Monsieur Louis answered. "I do not choose to kill. *L'affaire Poynton*, then. Harm is not meant to either of these young people. That I assure you upon my honor. In three

weeks, or say a month, we have finished. They may return to their homes if they will. We have no further interest in them. For those three weeks you must remain as you are — you, and if you have influence over him, Sir George Duncombe. The other two fools we have no care for. If they blundered into knowledge — well, they must pay. They are not our concern, yours and mine. For you, I bring you an offer, Monsieur Spencer."

"*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes!*" Spencer murmured.

Monsieur Louis smiled.

"My gift," he answered, "will not terrify you. You are a journalist. I offer to make the fortune of your paper. You shall be the first to announce an affair of the greatest international importance since the war between Russia and Japan was declared. No, I will go further than that. It is the greatest event since Waterloo."

"*L'affaire Poynton* strikes so deep?" Spencer remarked.

"So deep," the Baron answered. "It is the fools who grope their way into great places. So did the boy Poynton. You, my friend, shall be the one brilliant exception. You shall make yourself the king of journalists, and you shall be quoted down the century as having achieved the greatest journalistic feat of modern days."

Spencer turned his drawn, haggard face towards his visitor. A slight flush of color stained his cheek.

"You fascinate me," he said slowly. "I admit it. You have found the weak spot in my armor. Proceed! For whom do you speak?"

Monsieur Louis abandoned his somewhat lounging

attitude. He stood by Spencer's side, and, leaning down, whispered in his ear. Spencer's eyes grew bright.

"Monsieur Louis," he said, "you play at a great game."

The Baron shrugged his shoulders.

"Me!" he answered. "I am but a pawn. I do what I am told."

"To return for a moment to *l'affaire Poynton*," Spencer said. "I am in the humor to trust you. Have I then your assurance that the boy and girl do not suffer?"

"Upon my own honor and the honor of the company to whom I belong," he answered with some show of dignity. "It is a pledge which I have never yet broken."

"I am a bribed man," Spencer answered.

Monsieur Louis threw away his second cigarette. He cast a look almost of admiration upon the man who still lay stretched upon the couch.

"You are the only Englishman I ever met, Monsieur Spencer," he said, "who was not pig-headed. You have the tenacity of your countrymen, but you have the genius to pick out the right thread from the tangle, to know truth when you meet it, even in unlikely places. I doff my hat to you, Monsieur Spencer. If you permit I will send my own physician to you. You will be yourself in a week."

"You know the antidote?" Spencer remarked grimly.

"Naturally! Accidents will happen. You wish that I should send him?"

"Without doubt," Spencer answered. "I am weary of this couch."

"You shall leave it in a week," Monsieur promised, as he left the room.

Spencer closed his eyes. Already he felt coming on the daily headache, which, with the terrible weakness, was a part of his symptoms. But there was no rest for him yet. Monsieur Louis had scarcely been gone five minutes when Duncombe arrived.

Duncombe had had no word of his friend's illness. He stood over his couch in shocked surprise.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed. "I had no idea that you were ill. This is why I have not heard from you, then."

Spencer smiled as he held out his hand, and Duncombe, who seemed to catch some meaning in the upraised eyebrows of his friend, was shocked.

"You mean?" he exclaimed.

Spencer nodded.

"*L'affaire Poynton*," he said gently. "A very subtle dose of poison indeed, my friend. I shall not die, but I have had my little lesson. Here the individual has little chance. We fight against forces that are too many for us. I told you so at the start."

"Yet I," Duncombe answered, "have not suffered."

"My friend," Spencer answered, "it is because I am the more dangerous."

"You have discovered something?" Duncombe exclaimed.

"I came near discovering a great deal," Spencer answered. "Perhaps it would have been better for my system if I had discovered a little less. As it is I have finished with *l'affaire Poynton* for the present. You see how very nearly *l'affaire Poynton* finished me."

"It is not like you," Duncombe said thoughtfully, "to give anything up."

"We come face to face sometimes with unique experiences, which destroy precedent," Spencer answered. "This is one of them."

"And what," Duncombe asked, "do you advise me to do?"

"Always the same advice," Spencer answered. "Leave Paris to-day. Go straight back to Norfolk, read the newspapers, and await events."

"Well, I think that I shall do so," Duncombe answered slowly. "I have found out where Miss Poynton is, but she will not see me. I have made an enemy of my dearest friend, and I have, at any rate, interrupted your career and endangered your life. Yes, I will go back home."

"You may yet save your friend some — inconvenience," Spencer suggested. "Try to persuade him to go back with you."

"He will not listen to me," Duncombe answered. "He has brought an English detective with him, and he is as obstinate as a mule. For myself I leave at nine o'clock."

"You are well advised, exceedingly well advised," Spencer said. "Mind I do not take the responsibility of sending you away without serious reasons. I honestly believe that Miss Poynton is safe, whatever may have happened to her brother, and I believe that you will serve her best by your temporary absence."

Duncombe stood for a moment wrapped in thought. The last few months had aged him strangely. The strenuous days and nights of anxious thought had left their mark in deep lines upon his face. He looked

out of the window of Spencer's room, and his eyes saw little of the busy street below. He was alone once more with this strange, terrified girl upon the hillside, with the wind in their faces, and making wild havoc in her hair. He was with her in different moods in the little room behind his library, when the natural joy of her young life had for the moment reasserted itself. He was with her at their parting. He saw half the fearful regret with which she had left his care and accepted the intervention of the Marquise. Stirring times these had been for a man of his quiet temperament, whom matters of sentiment and romance had passed lightly by, and whose passions had never before been touched by the finger of fire. And now he was going back to an empty life — a life at least empty of joy, save the hope of seeing her again. For good or for evil, the great thing had found its way into his life. His days of calm animal enjoyment were over. Sorrow or joy was to be his. He had passed into the shadows of the complex life.

He remembered where he was at last, and turned to Spencer.

"About yourself, Spencer," he said. "Have you seen a doctor?"

"Yes. I am not seriously ill," his friend answered. "The worst is over now. And, Duncombe, it's hard for you to go, I know — but look here, I believe that you will be back in a month, and taking Miss Poynton to lunch *chez* Ritz. I never felt so sure of it as I do to-day."

Duncombe remembered the answer to his note, and found it hard to share his friend's cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VIII

A POLITICAL INTERLUDE

DUNCOMBE laid down his cue and strolled towards the sideboard, where his guest was already mixing himself a whisky and soda.

"By the by, Runton," he said, "have you seen anything of our friend Von Rothe since that little affair at your place?"

Lord Runton shook his head.

"Not once," he answered. "He behaved very decently about it on the whole; treated it quite lightly — but he would n't let me go near the police. It was a long way the most unpleasant thing that ever happened in my house."

"Never any further light upon it, I suppose?" Duncombe asked.

Lord Runton shook his head.

"None. Of course we could have traced them both without a doubt if we had put it in the hands of the police, but Von Rothe would n't hear of it. He tried to treat it lightly, but I know that he was very much worried."

"Do you yourself believe," Duncombe asked, "that it was a political affair or an ordinary robbery?"

"I think that it was the former," Lord Runton answered. "Those people were not common adventurers. By the by, George, have you got over your little weakness yet?" he added with a smile.

Duncombe shrugged his shoulders.

"Nearly made a fool of myself, did n't I?" he remarked, with a levity which did not sound altogether natural.

"She was an uncommonly fascinating young woman," Lord Runton said, "but she did n't seem to me very old at the game. She was clever enough to fool Von Rothe, though. He admits that he told her that he was expecting a special messenger from Berlin."

Duncombe seemed to have had enough of the subject. He got up and filled his pipe.

"Is Jack coming down this week?" he asked.

"No! He wired this morning that he can't get away. Sefton is n't coming, either. Between ourselves, George, something seems to be going on at the Foreign Office which I don't understand."

"What do you mean?" Duncombe asked. "There has been no hint at any sort of trouble in the papers."

"That 's just what I don't understand," Lord Runton continued. "It is certain that there is an extraordinary amount of activity at Portsmouth and Woolwich, but even the little halfpenny sensational papers make no more than a passing allusion to it. Then look at the movements of our fleet. The whole of the Mediterranean Fleet is at Gibraltar, and the Channel Squadron is moving up the North Sea as though to join the Home Division. All these movements are quite unusual."

"What do you make of them then?" Duncombe asked.

"I scarcely know," Lord Runton answered. "But I can tell you this. There have been three Cabinet Councils this week, and there is a curious air of apprehension in official circles in town, as though something

were about to happen. The service clubs are almost deserted, and I know for a fact that all leave in the navy has been suspended. What I don't understand is the silence everywhere. It looks to me as though there were really going to be trouble. The Baltic Fleet sailed this morning, you know."

Duncombe nodded.

"But," he said, "even if they were ill disposed to us, as no doubt Russia is just now, what could they do? One squadron of our fleet could send them to the bottom."

"No doubt," Lord Runton answered. "But supposing they found an ally?"

"France will never go to war with us for Russia's benefit," Duncombe declared.

"Granted," Lord Runton answered, "but have you watched Germany's attitude lately?"

"I can't say that I have," Duncombe admitted, "but I should never look upon Germany as a war-seeking nation."

"No, I dare say not," Lord Runton answered. "Nor would a great many other people. Every one is willing to admit that she would like our Colonies, but no one will believe that she has the courage to strike a blow for them. I will tell you what I believe, Duncombe. I believe that no Great Power has ever before been in so dangerous a position as we are in to-day."

Duncombe sat up in his chair. The weariness passed from his face, and he was distinctly interested. Lord Runton, without being an ardent politician, was a man of common-sense, and was closely connected with more than one member of the Cabinet.

"Are you serious, Runton?" he asked.

"Absolutely! Remember, I was in Berlin for two years, and I had many opportunities of gaining an insight into affairs there. What I can see coming now I have expected for years. There are two great factors which make for war. One is the character of the Emperor himself, and the other the inevitable rot, which must creep like a disease into a great army kept always upon a war footing, through a decade or more of inactivity. The Emperor is shrewd enough to see this. Nothing can possibly exist at its best which is not used for the purpose to which it owes its existence. That is why we have this flood of literature just now telling us of the gross abuses and general rottenness of the German army. Another five years of idleness, and Germany's position as the first military nation will have passed away. Like every other great power, it is rusting for want of use. The Emperor knows this."

Duncombe for many reasons was fascinated by his friend's quiet words. Apart from their obvious plausibility, they brought with them many startling suggestions. Had chance, he wondered, really made Phyllis Poynton and her brother pawns in the great game? He felt himself stirred to a rare emotion by the flood of possibilities which swept in suddenly upon him. Lord Runton noted with surprise the signs of growing excitement in his listener.

"Go on, Runton. Anything else?"

Lord Runton helped himself to a cigarette, and leaned across to light it.

"Of course," he continued, "I know that there are a great many people who firmly believe that for com-

mercial reasons Germany would never seek a quarrel with us. I will agree with them so far as to say that I do not believe that a war with England would be popular amongst the bourgeois of Germany. On the other hand, they would be quite powerless to prevent it. The Emperor and his ministers have the affair in their own hands. A slight break in our diplomatic relations, some trifle seized hold of by the Press and magnified at once into an insult, and the war torch is kindled. To-day war does not come about by the slowly growing desire of nations. The threads of fate are in the hands of a few diplomatists at Berlin and London — a turn of the wrist, and there is tension which a breath can turn either way. You ask me why the Emperor should choose England for attack. There are many reasons: first, because England alone could repay him for the struggle; secondly, because he is intensely and miserably jealous of our own King, who has avoided all his own hot-headed errors, and has yet played a great and individual part in the world's affairs; thirdly, because England is most easily attacked. I could give you other reasons if you wanted them."

"Quite enough," Duncombe answered. "What do you suppose would be the *casus belli?*"

"The progress of the Russian fleet through English waters," Lord Runton answered promptly. "Russia's interest in such a misunderstanding would be, of course, immense. She has only to fire on an English ship, by mistake of course, and the whole fat would be in the fire. England probably would insist upon the squadron being detained, Germany would protest against any such

action. We might very well be at war with Russia and Germany within ten days. Russia would immediately either make terms with Japan, or abandon any active operations in Manchuria and move upon India. Germany would come for us."

"Is this all purely imagination?" Duncombe asked, "or have you anything to go on?"

"So far as I am concerned," Lord Runton said slowly, "I, of course, know nothing. But I have a strong idea that the Government have at least a suspicion of some secret understanding between Russia and Germany. Their preparations seem almost to suggest it. Of course we outsiders can only guess, after all, at what is going on, but it seems to me that there is a chance to-day for our Government to achieve a diplomatic *coup*."

"In what direction?"

"An alliance with France. Mind, I am afraid that there are insurmountable obstacles, but if it were possible it would be checkmate to our friend the Emperor, and he would have nothing left but to climb down. The trouble is that in the absence of any definite proof of an understanding between Russia and Germany, France could not break away from her alliance with the former. Our present arrangement would ensure, I believe, a benevolent neutrality, but an alliance, if only it could be compassed, would be the greatest diplomatic triumph of our days. Hullo! Visitors at this hour. Was n't that your front-door bell, Duncombe?"

"It sounded like it," Duncombe answered. "Perhaps it is your man."

"Like his cheek, if it is!" Lord Runton answered, rising to his feet and strolling towards the sideboard. "I told him I would telephone round to the stables when I was ready. I suppose it is rather late, though I sha'n't apologize for keeping you up."

"I hope you won't," Duncombe answered. "I have never been more interested in my life — for many reasons. Don't bother about your man. Groves will see to him. Help yourself to another whisky and soda, and come and sit down."

There was a knock at the door, and the butler appeared.

"There are three gentlemen outside, sir, who wish to see you," he announced to Duncombe. "They will not give their names, but they say that their business is important, or they would not have troubled you so late."

Duncombe glanced at the clock. It was past midnight.

"Three gentlemen," he repeated, "at this time of night. But where on earth have they come from, Groves?"

"They did not say, sir," the man answered. "One of them I should judge to be a foreigner. They have a motor car outside."

Lord Runton held out his hand.

"Well, it's time I was off, anyhow," he remarked. "Come over and have lunch to-morrow. Don't bother about me. I'll stroll round to the stables and start from there. Good night."

Duncombe hesitated. He was on the point of asking his friend to stay, but before he could make up his mind Runton had lit a cigarette and strolled away.

"You can show the gentlemen in here, Groves," Duncombe said.

"Very good, sir."

The man disappeared. Duncombe, after a moment's hesitation, crossed the room, and opening an oak cupboard, slipped a small revolver into his pocket.

CHAPTER IX

ARRESTED!

ONE of his three visitors Duncombe recognized immediately. It was Monsieur Louis. Of the other two one was a Frenchman, a somewhat sombre-looking person, in a black beard and gold-rimmed eyeglasses, the other as unmistakably an Englishman of the lower middle class. His broad shoulders and somewhat stiff bearing seemed to suggest some sort of drill. Looking them over, Duncombe found himself instinctively wondering whether the personal strength of these two, which was obvious, might become a factor in the coming interview.

The Baron naturally was spokesman. He bowed very gravely to Duncombe, and did not offer his hand.

"I must apologize, Sir George," he said, "for disturbing you at such an inopportune hour. Our business, however, made it necessary for us to reach you with as little delay as possible."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to explain," Duncombe answered, "what that business is."

The Baron raised his hands with a little protesting gesture.

"I regret to tell you, Sir George," he announced, "that it is of a most unpleasant nature. I could wish that its execution had fallen into other hands. My companions are Monsieur Ridalle, of the French detective service, and our other friend here, whom I

do not know, is a constable from the Norwich Police Court. My own connections with the police service of my country you have already, without doubt, surmised."

"Go on," Duncombe said.

"I regret to say," Monsieur Louis continued, "that my friends here are in charge of a warrant for your arrest. You will find them possessed of all the legal documents, French and English. We shall have to ask you to come to Norwich with us to-night."

"Arrest!" Duncombe repeated. "On what charge?"

"An extremely serious one," the Baron answered gravely. "The charge of murder!"

Duncombe stared at him in amazement.

"Murder!" he repeated. "What rubbish!"

"The murder of Mademoiselle de Mermillon in her lodging on the night of the seventh of June last," the Baron said gravely. "Please do not make any remarks before these men. The evidence against you is already sufficiently strong."

Duncombe laughed derisively.

"What sort of a puppet show is this?" he exclaimed. "You know as well as any man living how that poor girl came to her end. This is a cover for something else, of course. What do you want of me? Let's get at it without wasting time."

"What we want of you is, I am afraid, only too simple," the Baron answered, shrugging his shoulders. "We must ask you to accompany us at once to Norwich Castle. "You will have to appear before the magistrates in the morning, when they will sign the extradition warrant. Our friend here, Monsieur Ridalle, will then take charge of you. Perhaps you would like

to look through the documents. You will find them all in perfect order."

Duncombe mechanically glanced through the French and English papers which were spread out before him. They had certainly a most uncomfortable appearance of being genuine. He began to feel a little bewildered.

"You mean to say that you have come here to arrest me on this charge? That you want me to go away with you to-night?" he asked.

"It is not a matter of wanting you to come," the Baron answered coldly. "It is a matter of necessity."

Duncombe moved towards the fireplace.

"Will you allow me the privilege of a few moments' conversation with you in private?" he said to the Baron. "Your companions will perhaps excuse you for a moment."

The Baron followed without remark. They stood facing one another upon the hearthrug. Duncombe leaned one elbow upon the mantlepiece, and turned towards his companion.

"Look here," he said, "those papers seem genuine enough, and if you insist upon it I will go with you to Norwich. I shall take care not to let you out of my sight, and if when we get there I find that this is any part of one of your confounded conspiracies you will find that the penalties for this sort of thing in England are pretty severe, However, no doubt you are well aware of that. The question is this. What do you really want from me?"

Monsieur Louis, who had lit a cigarette, withdrew it from his mouth and examined the lighted end for a moment in silence.

"The documents," he said, "are genuine. You are

arraigned in perfectly legal fashion. Upon the affidavits there the magistrates must grant the extradition warrant without hesitation. We have nothing to fear in that direction."

"The police," Duncombe remarked, "are perfectly aware of my innocence."

Monsieur shrugged his shoulders.

"The evidence," he said, "is remarkably convincing."

"Police-concocted evidence," Duncombe remarked, "would necessarily be so. I admit that you hold a strong card against me. I don't believe, however, that you have gone to all this trouble without some ulterior motive. What is it? What can I offer you in exchange for these documents?"

Monsieur Louis smiled.

"You are a man of common-sense, Sir George," he said. "I will speak to you without reserve. It is possible that you might be able to offer the Government department of my country to which I am attached an inducement to interest themselves in your behalf. Mind, I am not sure. But if my information is correct there is certainly a possibility."

"The Government department of your country to which you are attached," Duncombe repeated thoughtfully. "Let me understand you. You mean the secret service police?"

Monsieur Louis glanced a little nervously over his shoulder.

"Never mind what I mean, Sir George," he said quickly. "There are things which we do not speak of openly. This much is sufficient. I represent a power which can influence and direct even the criminal courts of justice of France."

"What bribe have I to offer you?" Duncombe asked. "Information? You know more than I do. I am afraid you have been misled."

"I think not," Monsieur Louis said quickly. "I will tell you what we want. A paper was left in your charge by Miss Phyllis Poynton at the time she was visiting at Runton Place."

"What of it?" Duncombe asked.

The Frenchman's face was suddenly tense with excitement. He recovered himself almost at once, but his voice shook, and a new earnestness found its way into his manner.

"Miss Poynton and her brother are with us," he said. "It is we who have been their benefactors. You know a good deal of their peculiar circumstances. A sudden need has arisen for the production of that paper within twenty-four hours. Give it to me now, and I will run the greatest risk I have ever run in my career. I will tear those warrants through."

"Have you any authority from Miss Poynton?" Duncombe asked.

"There was no time to procure it," Monsieur Louis explained. "Events march rapidly to-day. To be effective that paper must be in Paris to-morrow. The necessity for its production arose only a few hours ago."

"You ask me, then," Duncombe said slowly, "to hand over to you a paper which was placed in my charge by Miss Poynton?"

"In effect — yes!"

"I cannot do it!"

Monsieur Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not insist," he remarked. "I may be permitted

to remind you, however, that I have offered a great price."

"Perhaps!" Duncombe answered quietly.

Monsieur Louis turned to his assistants.

"Sir George Duncombe will accompany us," he said. "I can give you ten minutes, Sir George," he added, "in case you care to change your clothes."

"And supposing I refuse to come?" Duncombe asked.

Monsieur Louis smiled.

"You would scarcely be so foolish," he remarked. "In that case I should send the policeman here to the nearest station with the warrants and a demand for help. Our documents are in perfect order, and our case complete. You would scarcely be so foolish, I think, as to set yourself in direct opposition to the law!"

Duncombe was silent for several moments. Then he rang the bell. Monsieur Louis looked at him inquiringly, but before he could frame a question the butler was in the room.

"Pack my things for a week, Groves," Duncombe ordered. "I am going away to-night."

The man bowed and withdrew. Monsieur Louis merely shrugged his shoulders.

"A week!" he remarked. "You will be fortunate if you ever see your home again. Come, Sir George, be reasonable! I give you my word of honor that it is altogether to the interest of Miss Poynton that those papers be immediately produced. If she were here herself she would place them in my hands without a moment's hesitation."

"Possibly!" Duncombe answered. "Suppositions,

however, do not interest me. I undertook the charge of what she gave me, and I shall fulfil my trust."

Monsieur Louis turned to the policeman.

"Officer," he said, "this is Sir George Duncombe. Do your duty."

The man stepped forward and laid his hand upon Sir George's shoulder.

"Very sorry, sir," he said. "I am forced to arrest you on this warrant for the murder of Florence Mermillon on the night of the seventh of June. You will be brought before the magistrates at Norwich to-morrow."

Duncombe waved his hand towards the sideboard.

"If you gentlemen," he remarked, "would care for a little refreshment before you start?"

"It is against the rules, sir, thank you," the man answered. "I should be glad to get away as soon as possible."

Duncombe filled both his pockets with cigars and cigarettes. Then he turned towards the door.

"I am quite ready," he said.

They followed him out. There was a few minutes' delay waiting for Duncombe's bag.

"Your address, Sir George?" Groves inquired, as he brought it down.

"A little doubtful," Duncombe answered. "I will wire."

"In front, please, Sir George," Monsieur Louis insisted.

So they drove off, Duncombe in the front seat, the other three behind. The car gathered speed rapidly. In less than an hour they were half-way to Norwich. Then suddenly the driver took a sharp corner and turned down a long desolate lane.

"You're off the main road," Duncombe explained. "You should have kept straight on for Norwich."

The man took no notice. He even increased his speed. Duncombe was in the act of turning round when he felt the sudden swish of a wet cloth upon his face. He tried to break away, but he was held from behind as in a vise. Then his head fell back, and he remembered no more.

CHAPTER X

THE CHECKMATING OF MONSIEUR LOUIS

AT three o'clock in the morning Groves, in a discarded dressing-gown of his master's, opened the front door and peered cautiously out into the darkness. Monsieur Louis, who was standing upon the door-step, pushed past him into the hall.

"Your master has sent me back to fetch some papers," he announced, displaying a bunch of keys. "I am sorry to disturb you like this, but the matter is important. Please bring me a cup of coffee into the library in half an hour."

Groves, who was sorely perplexed, stood with his back to the door which Monsieur Louis had approached.

"Really, sir," he answered, "I scarcely know what to say. I am afraid that I cannot allow you to interfere with any of my master's property in his absence."

Monsieur Louis held out the keys.

"Quite right!" he said. "It is an awkward situation, of course. Your master did not tell you the reason of his sudden departure, I suppose?"

"Not a word, sir."

"There can be no harm in telling you this much, at any rate," Monsieur Louis continued smoothly. "Your master, through no fault of his own, got mixed up in a very unpleasant affair in Paris, and he will have to appear in the courts there. I am his friend, and wish to do all that I can to help him. We

have been talking the matter over, and I have strongly advised him to produce some papers which I think will help him materially. The police officer in whose charge he is would not allow him to return, so he handed me his keys and asked me to fetch them. I can assure you that I am your master's friend, and wish to do all that I can to help him. If he had not trusted me he would not have given me his keys, which no doubt you recognize."

Groves reluctantly stood on one side.

"I suppose I must let you in, sir," he said, "but I wish that the master had sent me a line."

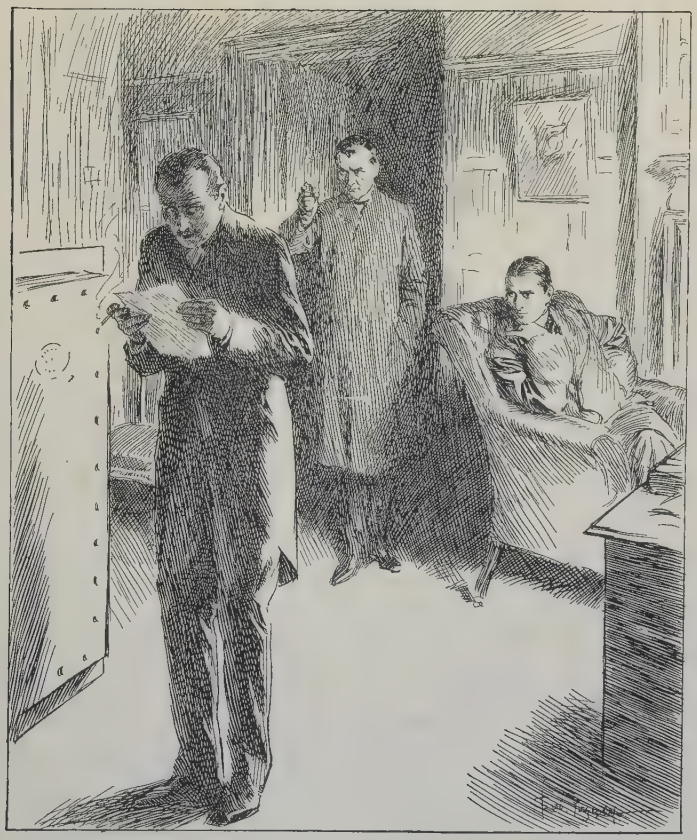
"We had neither pencil nor paper," Monsieur Louis said, "and the affair was urgent. I must be back in Norwich by eight o'clock."

"I will prepare the coffee, sir," Groves said, turning away. "If you require more light the switches are behind the door."

"Very good," Monsieur Louis said. "You need not have the slightest anxiety. I am here on your master's behalf."

Groves hesitated, and looked for a moment curiously around the room. He seemed as though he had something else to say, but checked himself at the last moment and withdrew. Monsieur Louis drew a little breath of relief.

He did not immediately proceed to work. He threw off his overcoat and lit a cigarette. His fingers were steady enough, but he was conscious of an unwonted sense of excitement. He was face to face with destiny. He had played before for great stakes, but never such as these. A single false step, an evil turn in the wheel of fortune, spelt death — and he was



"His hands shook, his teeth chattered."

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afraid to die. He moved to the sideboard. Everything there was as they had left it. He poured out some brandy and drank it off.

With fresh courage he moved to the safe, which stood in the corner of the room. It must be there, if anywhere, that this precious document lay. He tried his keys one by one. At last he found the right one. The great door swung slowly open.

He was spared all anxiety. There, on the top of a pile of legal-looking documents, leases, title-deeds, and the like, was a long envelope, and across it in Duncombe's sprawling writing these few words: —

"Entrusted to me by Miss Poynton. — Sept. 4th."

He grasped it in his fingers and tore open the envelope. As he read the single page of closely written writing his eyes seemed almost to protrude. He gave a little gasp. No wonder there were those who reckoned this single page of manuscript worth a great fortune. Every sentence, every word told its own story. It was a page of the world's history.

Then a strange thing happened. Some part of him rebelled against the instinct which prompted him carefully to fold and place in his breast-pocket this wonderful find of his. His nerves seemed suddenly frozen in his body. There was a curious numb sensation at the back of his neck which forbade him to turn round. His hands shook, his teeth chattered. The sweat of death was upon his forehead and despair in his heart. He had heard nothing, seen nothing; yet he knew that he was no longer alone.

When at last he turned round he turned his whole body. The muscles of his neck were numbed still his knees shook, and his face was ghastly. Monsieur

Louis of the Café Montmartre, brave of tongue and gallant of bearing, had suddenly collapsed. Monsieur Louis, the drug-sodden degenerate of a family whose nobles had made gay the scaffolds of the Place de la République, cowered in his place.

It was the worst upon which he looked with chattering teeth, but without surprise. The door of the inner room was open, and upon the threshold stood Toquet, small, dark, and saturnine — Toquet, with something which glittered in his hand, so that Monsieur Louis, already the prey of a diseased and ghastly imagination, felt the pain of the bullet in his heart. On an easy-chair by the fireside Henri de Bergillac was lounging, with a queer smile upon his lips.

"My friend," he said quietly, though the scorn which underlay his words seemed to bite the air, "you have solved for us a double problem: first, how to account for the absence of our host; and secondly, how to open that very formidable-looking safe. You will be so good as to place upon the table that document which you hold in your hands."

For a single second Monsieur Louis hesitated. Some lingering vestige of a courage, purely hereditary, showed him in one lightning-like flash how at least he might carry with him to a swift grave some vestige of his ruined self-respect. A traitor to his old friends, he might keep faith with the new. He had time to destroy. Even the agonies of death might last long enough to complete the task. But the impulse was only momentary. He shuddered afresh at the thought that he might have yielded to it. He threw it upon the table.

The Vicomte rose to his feet, glanced through the closely written page with something of the same excitement which had inspired its recent possessor, and carefully buttoned it up in his breast-pocket. Then he turned once more to the man who stood before them broken and trembling.

"Louis," he said, "you are the first traitor whom our society has hatched. I look upon you with curiosity as a thing I once called my friend. What imbecility prompted you to this?"

Monsieur Louis found nerve to shrug his shoulders.

"A million francs!" he answered.

"Heavens, but what folly!" the Vicomte murmured. "Did we not all know that a German was in Paris who offered a million, or two million francs for the missing page of that treaty? Do you think that he was not watched day and night? Bah! I have no patience to talk of this. What have you done with our host?"

"Arrested him for — Flossie! He is in a ditch halfway to Norwich."

"Hurt?"

"No! Chloroformed."

"How did you get here?"

"In an automobile from Lynn!"

"Good! It waits for you?"

"Yes."

"We will take it. My good friend here, Toquet, is familiar with the neighborhood. As Mr. Fielding, the American millionaire, you learned the excellence of these roads for quick travelling, did you not, *mon ami?* So!"

"You leave me here?" Monsieur Louis faltered.

"Ay, to rot if you will!" the Vicomte answered with sudden harshness.

"I will atone," Monsieur Louis faltered. "It was a single false step."

De Bergillac looked down upon him with unspeakable contempt.

"Atone! Listen, Louis! In this country you are safe. Crawl away into some hiding-place and make what you will of the rest of your days, but I will promise you this. If ever you set your feet upon one inch of France you shall meet with your deserts. There are many things which those who play the great game must pardon, but there is one crime for which no atonement is possible, and you have committed it. You are a traitor!"

De Bergillac turned away. The effeminacy of his manner seemed to have disappeared under the strain of his extreme anger. It was his race, after all, which had asserted itself. And then the door was thrown suddenly open and a wild-looking figure confronted them.

It was Duncombe, muddy from head to foot, pale and with a slight wound upon the temple, from which the blood had trickled down his face. He saw the open safe, and Monsieur Louis a pitiful figure, and he did not hesitate. He scarcely glanced at the others. He strode forward and seized the Baron by the collar.

"Give me back what you have stolen, you blackguard!" he exclaimed.

Monsieur Louis was breathless. It was the young Vicomte who interposed.

"Our friend," he remarked suavely, "has not been

successful in his little effort. The document he came to purloin is in my pocket, and here, Sir George, is my warrant for retaining possession of it."

He held out a note which Duncombe took and read with a little sigh of relief.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "You have the document?"

De Bergillac tapped his breast-pocket.

"It is here," he said.

Duncombe turned to Monsieur Louis.

"My arrest, then," he remarked, "was part of the game?"

"Exactly!" De Bergillac answered. "This little document entrusted to your care by the young English lady was worth one million francs to the man who suborned our friend here. It was worth while — this little enterprise. The pity of it is that it has failed. Sir George, I go to Paris to-night. I offer you a safe conduct if you care to accompany me. *L'affaire Poynton* does not exist any more."

"Can you give me ten minutes to change my clothes?" Duncombe asked eagerly.

"No more," De Bergillac answered. "I will get rid of our friend here."

There was a knock at the door. Groves entered with coffee. At the sight of his master he nearly dropped the tray.

"It 's all right," Duncombe said, smiling. "We had a little spill, and I 've lost my bag. Pack me some more things quickly."

"Very good, sir," Groves answered, and withdrew precipitately.

De Bergillac laid his hand upon Duncombe's arm.

"There is only one thing, my friend," he said. "I trust that it is Mr. Guy Poynton who is your friend, and not his beautiful sister? Eh? I am answered! The misfortune! Never mind! I will drink my coffee to *les beaux yeux des autres!*"

CHAPTER XI

THE MAKING OF HISTORY

THREE men were the sole occupants of the great room whose windows looked out upon the Louvre.

The table around which they were seated was strewn with papers and maps. The door of the room was locked, and a sentry stood outside in the passage. The three men were busy making history.

The man who occupied the seat at the head of the table was the Monsieur Grisson to whom Guy Poynton, at the instigation of the Duc de Bergillac, had told his story. It was he who was spokesman.

"The situation," he said, "is one which bristles with difficulties. We will assume for a moment the truth of what we have certainly reasonable ground to believe. Russia has shown every sign of disappointment with us for our general attitude during the war. Our understanding with England has provoked a vigorous though unofficial protest from her representatives here. Since then our relations have become to a certain extent strained. Germany, ever on the look-out for complications which might lead to her own advantage, steps in. Her attitude towards Russia is changed to one of open and profound sympathy. Russia, in her desperate straits, rises like a starving fish to a fat fly. Here it is that our secret service steps in."

"Our secret service — and her allies," one of the other men murmured.

"Exactly! We pass now to the consideration of facts which need one thing only to justify our course of action. Evidence is brought to us that a secret meeting took place between the Czar of Russia and the Emperor of Germany. From all the information which we have collected that meeting was possible. I personally believe that it took place. A treaty is said to have been drawn up between them, having for its object the embroilment of England with Russia, and an alliance of Germany with Russia so far as regards her quarrel with England. We know that Germany is secretly mobilizing men and ships. We know that the ambition of the Emperor is to possess himself of the Colonies of Great Britain, if not actually to hold his court in London. We know that his jealousy of King Edward amounts to a disease. We know that he is a man of daring and violent temper, with an indomitable will and an unflinching belief in his own infallibility and the infallibility of his army and navy. We know that he has at least a dozen schemes for a sudden attack upon England, and mighty though the navy of Great Britain is, it is not in our opinion strong enough to protect her shore from the combined Baltic and German fleets and also protect her Colonies. England, through our friendship, has been warned. She proposes with most flattering alacrity the only possible counter-stroke — an alliance with ourselves. We must decide within twelve hours. The treaty lies upon my desk there. Upon us must rest the most momentous decision which any Frenchman within our

recollection has been called upon to make. What have you to say, gentlemen?"

There was a short silence. Then the man who sat at Monsieur Grisson's right hand spoke.

"The issues before us," he said slowly, "are appalling. Every Frenchman's blood must boil at the thought of Germany greedily helping herself to the mighty wealth and power of Great Britain — becoming by this single master-stroke the strongest nation on earth, able to dictate even to us, and to send her word unchallenged throughout the world. It is a hideous picture! It must mean the abandonment forever of the hope of every true Frenchman. Every minute will become a menace to us. Wilhelm, the arrogant, with British gold and British ships at his back, will never forget to flaunt himself before us to our eternal humiliation."

"You are taking it for granted," his neighbor remarked, "that Germany will be successful."

"The odds are in her favor," was the quiet reply. "The navy of Great Britain is immense, but her sea front, so to speak, is enormous. She is open to be the prey of a sudden swift attack, and the moment has never been more favorable."

"Let all these things be granted," the third man said. "Even then, are we free to enter into this alliance with England? Our treaty with Russia remains. We have no proof that she has broken faith with us. If this secret treaty between Russia and Germany really exists, it is, of course, another matter. But does it? We have nothing but the word of an English boy. The rest is all assumption. The whole

affair might be a nightmare. We might sign this treaty with England, and find afterwards that we had been the victim of a trick. We should be perjured before the face of all Europe, and our great financial interest in Russia would at once be placed in a perilous position."

A telephone upon the table rang softly. Monsieur Grisson held the receiver to his ear and listened. Then he rose to his feet.

"Count von Munchen desires a word with me," he announced. "He pledges himself not to keep me more than five minutes. I had better receive him. Excuse me, gentlemen."

The two men were left alone. The elder and stouter of the two busied himself with an inch rule and an atlas. He seemed to be making calculations as to the distance between Cherbourg and a certain spot in the North Sea.

"What is the chief's own mind?" his companion asked. "Does any one know?"

The other shook his head.

"Who can say? Our ties of friendship with England are too recent to make this a matter of sentiment. I believe that without proof he fears to accept this statement. And yet above all things he fears Germany. There was some talk of a missing page of the actual treaty between Russia and Germany. If this could be found I believe that he would sign the draft treaty,"

"I myself," the other said, "do not believe that England would be so easily overpowered."

"It is the suddenness and treachery of the attack which counts so greatly in its favor," his companion said. "It might be all over in two days before she

could assemble a fifth part of her forces. If our information is correct Germany has men enough mobilized to run huge risks. Besides, you know how Lafarge's report ran, and what he said. The German army is beginning to suffer from a sort of dry rot, as must all institutions which fulfil a different purpose than that for which they exist. The Emperor knows it. If war does not come Germany will have to face severe military troubles."

"I myself am for the alliance!"

"And I," the other replied, "if proof of this Germano-Russian understanding could be produced."

Monsieur Grisson returned. He carefully closed and locked the door behind him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the German Ambassador has just left me. His mission in every way confirms our secret information. He has been instructed to inquire as to our attitude in the event of any British interference with the Baltic Fleet while in home waters."

The two men looked up expectantly. Monsieur Grisson continued: —

"I replied that it was a contingency which we scarcely thought it worth while to consider. I expressed my firm belief that England would observe all the conventions, written and understood, of international law."

"And he?"

"He was not satisfied, of course. He declared that he had certain information that England was making definite plans with a view to ensure the delay of the fleet. He went on to say that Germany was determined not to tolerate any such thing, and he concludes that we, as Russia's ally, would at any rate remain

neutral should Germany think it her duty to interfere."

"And your reply?"

"I answered that in the event of untoward happenings France would act as her honor dictated — remaining always mindful of the obligations of her alliance. He was quite satisfied."

"He had no suspicion of this?" the young man asked, touching the treaty with his forefinger.

"None. It is believed in Germany that the young Englishman was really found drowned in the Seine after a short career of dissipation. Our friends served us well here. Now, gentlemen, the English Ambassador will be here in twenty minutes. What am I to say to him? Do we sign this draft agreement or do we not?"

There was a silence which lasted nearly a minute. Then the younger of the two men spoke.

"Sir," he said respectfully, "without some proof of Russia's falsity I cannot see how in honor we can depart from our treaty obligations with her to the extent of signing an agreement with her putative enemy. England must fight her own battle, and God help her!"

"And you?" Monsieur Grisson asked, turning to the third man.

"I agree," was the regretful answer. "If this treacherous scheme is carried out I believe that France will be face to face with the greatest crisis she has known in history. Even then I dare not suggest that we court dishonor by breaking an alliance with a friend in distress."

"You are right, gentlemen," Monsieur Grisson said

with a sigh. "We must tell Lord Fothergill that our relations with his country must remain unfettered. I——"

Again the telephone bell rang. Monsieur Grisson listened, and replied with a sudden return to his old briskness of manner.

"It is young De Bergillac," he announced. "He has been in England in search of that missing page of the treaty. I have told them to show him in."

The Vicomte entered, paler than ever from recent travel, and deeply humiliated from the fact that there was a smut upon his collar which he had had no time to remove. He presented a paper to Monsieur Grisson and bowed. The President spread it out upon the table, and the faces of the three men as they read became a study. Monsieur Grisson rang the bell.

"Monsieur le Duc de Bergillac and a young English gentleman," he told the attendant, "are in my private retiring-room. Desire their presence."

The servant withdrew. The three men looked at one another.

"If this is genuine!" the younger murmured.

"It is the Russian official paper," his *vis-à-vis* declared, holding it up to the light.

Then the Duc de Bergillac and Guy Poynton were ushered in. Monsieur Grisson rose to his feet.

"Monsieur Poynton," he said, "we have all three heard your story as to what you witnessed in the forest of Pozen. It is part of your allegation that a page of writing from the private car which you were watching was blown to your feet, and that you picked it up and brought it to Paris with you. Look

at this sheet of paper carefully. Tell me if it is the one."

Guy glanced at it for a moment, and handed it back.

"It is certainly the one," he answered. "If you look at the back you will see my initials there and the date."

Monsieur Grisson turned it over quickly. The two other men looked over his shoulder, and one of them gave a little exclamation. The initials and date were there.

Then Monsieur Grisson turned once more to Guy. He was not a tall man, but he had dignity, and his presence was impressive. He spoke very slowly.

"Monsieur Guy Poynton," he said, "it is not often that so great an issue — that the very destinies of two great countries must rest upon the simple and uncorroborated story of one man. Yet that is the position in which we stand to-day, Do not think that you are being treated with distrust. I speak to you not on behalf of myself, but for the millions of human beings whose welfare is my care, and for those other millions of your own countrymen, whose interests must be yours. I ask you solemnly — is this story of yours word for word a true one?"

Guy looked him in the face resolutely, and answered without hesitation.

"On my honor as an Englishman," he declared, "it is true!"

Monsieur Grisson held out his hand.

"Thank you!" he said.

The three men were again alone. The man who controlled the destinies of France dipped his pen in the ink.

"Gentlemen," he said, "do you agree with me that I shall sign this draft?"

"We do!" they both answered.

The President signed his name. Then he turned the handle of the telephone.

"You may show Lord Fothergill in!" he ordered.

CHAPTER XII

AN OLD FRIEND

IT was perhaps as well for Andrew Pelham that he could not see Phyllis' look as she entered the room. An English gentleman, she had been told, was waiting to see her, and she had thought of no one but Duncombe. It was true that she had sent him away, but only an hour ago the Marquise had told her that her emancipation was close at hand. He too might have had a hint! The little smile, however, died away from her lips as she saw who was waiting for her with such manifest impatience.

"You, Andrew!" she exclaimed in amazement. "Why, however did you find me out?"

He took both her hands in his. The look upon his face was transfiguring.

"At last! At last!" he exclaimed. "Never mind how I found you! Tell me, what does it all mean? Are you here of your own free will?"

"Absolutely!" she answered.

"It was you at Runton?"

"Yes."

"Under a false name — with a man who committed robbery!"

She shrugged her shoulders a little wearily.

"My dear Andrew!" she said, "I will admit that I have been doing all manner of incomprehensible

things. I could n't explain everything. It would take too long. What I did, I did for Guy's sake, and of my own free will. It will be all over in a day or two now, and we shall be coming back to Raynesworth. Then I will tell you tales of our adventures which will make your hair stand on end."

"It is n't true about Guy, then?" he exclaimed.

She hesitated for a moment.

"Andrew," she said, "I cannot tell you anything. It must sound rather horrid of me, but I cannot help it. I want you to go away. In a day or two I will write."

He looked at her in pained bewilderment.

"But, Phyllis," he protested, "I am one of your oldest friends! You ask me to go away and leave you here with strangers, without a word of explanation. Why, I have been weeks searching for you."

"Andrew," she said, "I know it. I don't want to be unkind. I don't want you to think that I have forgotten that you are, as you say, one of my oldest friends. But there are times when one's friends are a source of danger rather than pleasure. Frankly, this is one of them."

His face darkened. He looked slowly around the magnificent room. He saw little, but what he could distinguish was impressive.

"Your riddles," he said gravely, "are hard to read. You want me to go away and leave you here."

"You must," she said firmly.

"Did you treat Duncombe like this?" he asked in a blind fit of jealousy.

"You have not the right to ask me such a question," she answered coldly.

"Not the right! Not the right!" he repeated. "Who else has, then? Haven't I watched you grow from a beautiful, capricious child into the woman you are? Haven't I taught you, played with you, done your bidding blindly ever since you came into your kingdom? Haven't I felt the pain and the joy of you in my heart? Who else has a better right, then? Duncombe, who came here, a stranger to you — or is it one of your new friends?"

She came close to him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't be foolish, Andrew!" she said softly.

His whole expression changed. The bitterness left his tone.

"Ah, Phyllis!" he said. "That is more like yourself."

"And I want you," she said, "to be like your old self. You have always been my best friend, Andrew. I hope you will always be that."

He tried to look into her face. It seemed to him that there was a little unnecessary emphasis in her words.

"I am not a child now, you know," she continued. "I am quite old enough to take care of myself. You must believe that, Andrew. You must go away, and not worry about me. You will do this, please, because I ask you!"

"If I must," he said reluctantly. "I will go away, but not to worry about you — that is impossible. You seem to be surrounded by all the mediæval terrors which confronted the emancipation of princesses in our fairy books. Only a short time ago Duncombe implored me to follow his example, and leave you and

Paris alone. The detective whom I brought with me has been shadowed ever since we left Paris. Last night he left me for a few hours, and this morning comes a note from the hospital. He is lying there with the back of his head beaten in — garotters, of course, the police say, looking for plunder. How can you ask me to be easy in my mind about you?"

She smiled reassuringly.

"No harm will come to me here, I can promise you," she said. "It is you who run the most risk if you only knew it. Sir George Duncombe gave you the best advice when he tried to get you to return to England."

"I cannot leave Lloyd now until he has recovered," Andrew answered. "Tell me, Phyllis, has Duncombe found you out? Has he been here?"

"Yes," she answered. "I sent him away — as I am sending you."

"Has he ever told you," Andrew asked, "why he was willing in the first instance to come to Paris in search of you?"

"No," she answered. "Was n't it because he was your friend?"

He shook his head.

"It is his affair, not mine," he said with a sigh. "Ask him some day."

"You won't tell me, Andrew?"

"No! I will go now! You know where to send for me if you should need help. I can find my way down, thank you. I have a guide from the hotel outside."

The Marquise swept into the room as he passed out, an impression of ermine and laces and perfume.

"Another of your English lovers, *ma belle?*" she asked.

"Scarcely that," Phyllis answered. "He is a very old friend, and he was rather hard to get rid of."

"I think," the Marquise said, "you would get rid of all very willingly for the sake of one, eh?"

The Marquise stared insolently into the girl's face. Phyllis only laughed.

"One is usually considered the ideal number — in our country," she remarked demurely.

"But the one?" the Marquise continued. "He would not be one of these cold, heavy countrymen of yours, no? You have learnt better perhaps over here?"

It was a cross-examination, but Phyllis could not imagine its drift.

"I have not had very much opportunity over here, have I, to amend my ideals?" she asked. "I think the only two Frenchmen I have met are the Marquis and that languid young man with the green tie, the Vicomte de Bergillac, was n't it?"

The Marquise watched her charge closely.

"Well," she said, "he is *comme il faut*, is he not? You find him more elegant, more chic than your Englishmen, eh?"

Phyllis shook her head regretfully.

"To me," she admitted, "he seemed like an exceedingly precocious spoilt child!"

"He is twenty-three," the Marquise declared.

Phyllis laughed softly.

"Well," she said, "I do not think that I shall amend my ideals for the sake of the Vicomte de Bergillac!"

The Marquise looked at her doubtfully.

"Tell me, child," she said, "you mean, then, that of the two — your English Sir George Duncombe and Henri — you would prefer Sir George?"

Phyllis looked at her with twinkling eyes.

"You would really like to know?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"Sir George Duncombe — infinitely!"

The Marquise seemed to have recovered her good spirits.

"Come, little one," she said, "you lose color in the house. I will take you for a drive!"

. . . . . .

Andrew, conscious that he was being followed, sat down outside a café on his way homewards, and bade his guide leave him for a little time. Instantly there was the soft rustle of feminine skirts by his side, and a woman seated herself on the next chair.

"Monsieur has not been up to the Café Montmartre lately!"

Pelham turned his head. It was the young lady from Vienna.

"No!" he answered. "I have not been there since I had the pleasure of seeing Mademoiselle!"

"Monsieur has discovered all that he wanted to know?"

He nodded a little wearily.

"Yes, I think so!"

She drew her chair quite close to his. The sable of her turban hat almost brushed his cheek, and the perfume of the violets at her bosom was strong in his nostrils.

"Monsieur has seen the young lady?"

"I have seen her," he answered.

"Monsieur is indebted to me," she said softly, "for some information. Let me ask him one question. Is it true, this story in the newspapers, of the finding of this young man's body? Is Monsieur Guy Poynton really dead?"

"I know no more than we all read in the newspapers," he answered.

"His sister spoke of him as dead?" she asked.

"I cannot discuss this matter with you, Mademoiselle," he answered.

"Monsieur is ungrateful," she declared with a little grimace. "It is only that which I desire to know. He was such a *beau garçon*, that young Englishman. You will tell me that?" she whispered.

He shook his head.

"Mademoiselle will excuse me," he said. "I am going to take a carriage to my hotel!"

"It is on the way to leave me at my rooms, if you will be so kind," she suggested, laying her hand upon his arm.

"Mademoiselle will excuse me," he answered, turning away. "Good afternoon."

Mademoiselle also took a carriage, and drove to a large house at the top of the Champs Élysées. She was at once admitted, and passed with the air of one familiar with the place into a small room at the back of the house, where a man was sitting at a table writing. He looked up as she entered.

"Well?"

She threw herself into a chair.

"I have been following the Englishman, Pelham,

all day," she said in German. "He has seen Miss Poynton. I have talked with him since at a café, but he would tell me nothing. He has evidently been warned."

The man grumbled as he resumed his writing.

"That fact alone should be enough for us," he remarked. "If there is anything to conceal we can guess what it is. These amateurs who are in league with the secret service are the devil! I would as soon resign. What with them and the regular secret service, Paris is an impossible city for us. Where we would watch we are watched ourselves. The streets and cafés bristle with spies! I do not wonder that you find success so difficult, Mademoiselle!"

"I have n't done so badly!" she protested.

"No, for you have not been set easy tasks. Can you tell me, though, where that young Englishman disappeared to when he left the Café Montmartre before your very eyes? Can you tell me whether the secret service got hold of his story, how much the French Government believed of it, whether they have communicated with the English Government, and how much they know? Beyond these things, it is not your province to see, or mine, Mademoiselle, and it is not for us to guess at or inquire into the meaning of things. Tell me, is it worth while to have this man Pelham put out of the way for a time?"

She shook her head.

"I do not think so," she answered. "He is quite stupid. The other, Sir George Duncombe, he was different. If he had stayed in Paris he would have been worth watching."

A bell rang. The man rose.

"The chief!" he said. "Be at the café to-night."

Mademoiselle went away thoughtfully.

"It is over this affair," she said to herself. "Carl knows everything!"

CHAPTER XIII

A NEWSPAPER SENSATION

SPENCER, whose recovery during the last few days had been as rapid as the first development of his indisposition, had just changed for dinner, and was lighting a *cigarette d'appertit* when, without waiting to be announced, the Vicomte de Bergillac entered the room. Spencer, with lightning-like intuition, knew that his time was come.

"Off with your coat, man, and get your code books out. I am going to give you the most sensational story which has ever appeared in your paper!" he exclaimed. "Only, remember this! It must appear to-morrow morning. I am arranging for the French papers to have it. Yours shall be the only English journal. Glance through these sheets. They contain the story of *l'affaire Poynton!*"

Spencer was master of the gist of the thing in a very few moments. His eyes were bright with excitement.

"Who guarantees this?" he asked quickly.

"My uncle has signed it," Henri de Bergillac answered, "and at the bottom of the page there you will see a still more distinguished signature. You understand *l'affaire Poynton* now? It is very simple. That English boy actually witnessed a meeting between the Czar and the Emperor, and turns up in Paris with a

loose sheet of a treaty between the two, relative to an attack upon England. Our people got hold of him at the Café Montmartre, and we have hidden him away ever since. Our friends, the Germans, who seem to have had some suspicions about him, have filled the city with spies, but from the first we have kept them off the scent. We had a little difficulty in convincing our friends your country-people, but we managed to borrow a few papers from the German Ambassador whilst he was staying at a country-house in England, which were sufficient."

Spencer was already writing. His coat lay on the floor where he had thrown it.

"Don't go for a moment, De Bergillac," he said. "I want to ask you a few things. I can talk and code at the same time. What about Miss Poynton?"

"Well, we had to take care of her too," De Bergillac said. "Of course all her inquiries over here would have led to nothing, but they knew her at the English Embassy, so we walked her off from the Café Montmartre one night and took her to a friend of mine, the Marquise de St. Ethol. We told her a little of the truth, and a little, I'm afraid, which was an exaggeration. Anyhow, we kept her quiet, and we got her to go to England for us with Toquet. They had a very narrow shave down at Runton, by the by."

"After this," Spencer said with a smile, "the secret service people proper will have to look to their laurels. It is a triumph for the amateurs."

The Vicomte twirled his tiny black moustache.

"Yes," he said, "we have justified ourselves. It has cost us something, though!"

"You mean?"

"Louis!"

Spencer stopped writing.

"It was an affair of a million francs," the Vicomte said. "I hope he has got the money."

Spencer resumed his work.

"The Baron a traitor!" he exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"In England! We are not vindictive. If the Germans paid him a million francs they got nothing for it. He has been watched from the first. We knew of it the moment he came to terms with them. He only knows bare facts. Nothing beyond. He is going to Brazil, I think. We shall not interfere."

"Tell me why," Spencer said, "you were so down on all of us who joined in the search for the Poyntons."

"We could not afford to run any risks of your discovering a clue," De Bergillac answered, "because you in your turn were closely watched by German spies, hoping to discover them through you. That is why we had to strike hard at all of you who interfered. I was sorry for little Flossie — but she knew the risk she ran. We had to stop you, induce Duncombe to leave Paris, and knock on the head a fool of an English detective for fear he might discover something. Monsieur Pelham was getting into danger, but, of course, it is all over now. To-morrow we are bringing Guy into Paris."

Spencer nodded.

"Where is Duncombe?" he asked.

"Back in Paris," De Bergillac answered. "Arrived here with me to-day. He is much in love with the beautiful sister. Alas! It was to him that she entrusted the missing page of that treaty which she

found in her brother's luggage. Some day I must tell you of my adventures in England last night, when I went over to get it and found Louis a little ahead of me."

"Some day," Spencer murmured, writing for dear life, with the perspiration streaming down his forehead. "My dear Vicomte, do you mind ringing the bell? I want my servant. I must telegraph my paper to warn them of this. They must clear two columns of type for me."

The Vicomte did as he was asked. Then he turned towards the door.

"I will leave you," he said. "The dust of England is still in my throat. Absinthe, a bath and dinner! *Au revoir, mon ami!* Confess that I have kept the promise which Louis made you. It is what you call a *coup* this, eh?"

Out on the boulevards the papers were selling like wildfire. The Vicomte bought one, and sitting down outside a café ordered absinthe. The great headlines attracted him at once. He sipped his absinthe and smiled to himself.

"The play commences!" he murmured. "I must return to Monsieur Spencer."

Spencer was still working like a madman.

"I must interrupt you for a moment," De Bergillac said. "I have brought you an evening paper. The Baltic Fleet has sunk half a dozen English fishing-boats and the whole country is in a frenzy. It is the beginning."

Spencer nodded.

"Leave the paper, there's a good fellow," he said. "I will look it through presently. If there is time —

if there is only time this will be the greatest night of my life. No other paper has a hint, you say?"

"Not one!"

"If I could put back the clock a single hour," Spencer muttered. "Never mind! Williams, more sheets!"

De Bergillac took his leave. He had telephoned for his motor, which was waiting outside. He gave the order to drive to his rooms. On the way he passed the great pile of buildings in the Louvre. In a room at the extreme end of the pile a light was burning. De Bergillac looked at it curiously. A small brougham, which he recognized, stood outside.

"If one could see inside," he muttered. "It should be interesting!"

. . . . . .

In a sense it was interesting. Monsieur Grisson sat there in front of his open table. His secretary's place by his side was vacant. Opposite sat a tall man with gray hair and dark moustache. He was dressed for the evening, and his breast glittered with stars and orders.

"It is exceedingly kind of you, Monsieur," he said, "to grant me this interview at so short notice. I was most anxious to apprise you of news, which as yet I believe has not found its way into your papers. You have read accounts of a Russian attack upon an English fishing-fleet, but you have not yet been informed of the presence — the undoubted presence — of Japanese torpedo-boats concealed amongst them."

Monsieur Grisson raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed no!" he answered. "We have not even heard a rumor of anything of the sort."

"Nevertheless, their presence was indubitable," the Prince declared. "In those circumstances, Monsieur, you can doubtless understand that our reply to any protests on the part of England will be of an unpacific nature. We should not for a moment allow ourselves to be dictated to by the allies of our enemy."

"Naturally!" Monsieur Grisson answered. "On the other hand, you surely do not wish to embroil yourself in a quarrel with England at the present moment?"

"We wish to quarrel with no one," the Prince answered haughtily. "At the same time, we are not afraid of England. We recognize the fact that if war should come it is an independent affair, and does not come under the obligations of our alliance. We ask, therefore, for your neutrality alone."

Monsieur Grisson bowed.

"But, Prince," he said gravely, "you speak lightly enough of the possibilities of war, but surely you must know that the English fleet in the Channel and at Gibraltar altogether outmatches the Baltic Fleet?"

"A Russian," the Prince answered grandly, "is not afraid of great odds!"

Monsieur Grisson bowed.

"For the sake of humanity," he said, "I trust most sincerely that the affair may be peaceably arranged. If the contrary should turn out to be the case, I can only say that in a quarrel which concerns Russia and England alone, France would remain benevolently neutral. As you have remarked, the obligations of our treaty do not apply to such a case."

The Prince played nervously with the star at his chest. Both men were well aware that up to now they had been merely playing with words.

"There is another contingency," the Russian remarked, "which, now we are upon the subject, it would perhaps be as well to allude to. The relations between Germany and England, as you know, just now are very sorely strained. If Germany should take advantage of the present situation to make a demonstration against England, that, of course, would not, from your point of view, affect the situation?"

Monsieur Grisson looked like a man who sees before him amazing things.

"My dear Prince," he said, "do not let us misunderstand one another. You cannot by any possibility be suggesting that Germany might associate herself with you in your resistance to possible English demands?"

The Russian leaned back in his chair.

"Germany is on the spot," he remarked, "and knows the fact of the case. She has proofs of the presence of Japanese torpedo-boats amongst the English fishing-fleet. Her natural love of fair play might possibly lead her to espouse our cause in this particular instance. This, of course, would make for peace. If Germany commands, England will obey. She could not do otherwise."

"You have introduced, my dear Prince," Monsieur Grisson said, "an altogether new phase of this question, and one which merits the most grave consideration. Am I to understand that there is any arrangement between Germany and yourself with respect to this question?"

"Scarcely anything so definite as an arrangement," the Prince answered. "Merely an understanding!"

Monsieur Grisson had the air of a man who had just received grave tidings of his dearest friend.

"Is this, Monsieur le Prince," he said, "entirely in accord with our own treaty obligations?"

"We do not consider it to be in contravention to them," the Prince answered.

The gravity of Monsieur Grisson's manner grew even more pronounced.

"My dear Prince," he said, "you are doubtless aware that during the last few weeks there have been some very strange rumors about as to a meeting between your master and the Emperor of Germany, and an agreement which was forthwith signed between them. I need not remark that all such rumors were entirely discredited here. Such a meeting kept secret from us would of course be very seriously considered here."

The Prince smiled. He remained admirably self-possessed, though the very veins in his forehead were swollen with anger.

"A canard of the sort has reached my ears," he remarked. "Some English boy, I believe, imagined or dreamed that he saw some such meeting. We scarcely need, I think, to discuss this seriously."

"Personally I agree with you," Monsieur Grisson said smoothly. "My ministry, however, seem to have been a little impressed by the boy's story. An autograph letter from the Czar, denying it, would perhaps make our negotiations more easy."

"It shall be forthcoming," the Prince remarked, rising. "By the by, I hear reports of great activity from Cherbourg. More manœuvres, eh?"

Monsieur Grisson shrugged his shoulders.

"Our new naval chief," he remarked, "is a marvel of industry. You know the English proverb about the new broom, eh?"

The Prince bowed.

"During the next few hours," he remarked, "many things may happen. You will be always accessible?"

"I shall not leave my post, Prince!" Monsieur Grisson answered. "You will find me here at any time!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAN WHO SAVED HIS COUNTRY

ON the following morning the inhabitants of London, Paris, Berlin, and St. Petersburg for a sum varying from a halfpenny to a penny were treated to sensationalism as thrilling as any six-shilling shocker hot from the press and assured of its half-million circulation. One English and one French newspaper outdid their competitors by publishing side by side with their account of the exploits of the Russian fleet a marvellous but circumstantial story of a meeting and alliance between the rulers of Germany and Russia. The eyes of the whole world were turned towards Kiel, and more wonderful rumors still flashed backwards and forwards along the wires throughout Europe. A great mobilization can be kept secret up to a certain point, but when men and ships are collected and ready the truth must out.

At an unusually early hour Monsieur Grisson, supported now by two members of his ministry, received a visit from the Russian and German Ambassadors, Prince Korndoff and Count von Munchen. The usual compliments were quickly exchanged.

"I have asked my friend Count von Munchen to accompany me," Prince Korndoff explained, "because we are here to speak with you on a matter concerning which our interests are identical. You have read the demands which England has dared to lay before my

master with reference to the encounter in the North Sea."

Monsieur Grisson bowed.

"I have studied them with great interest," he admitted.

"I do not need tell you then that they are scouted with indignation by my master and his advisers," the Prince answered. "Neither shall we permit for a single moment the detention of our fleet upon its mission."

"That means, then, war with England," Monsieur Grisson remarked quietly.

"Unless they instantly withdraw their insolent demands — undoubtedly," the Prince answered.

Monsieur Grisson turned to the German.

"And you, Count," he asked, "how does this concern you?"

"We also," the Count answered, "consider the demands of England unwarrantable. We believe that there were undoubtedly Japanese torpedo boats concealed amongst the English fishing fleet, and we consider that the action of the Admiral in command of the Russian fleet was fully justified."

"You are prepared, then, to give Russia your moral support?" the President asked.

"We are prepared to do more," the Count answered boldly. "If England persists in her demands we are prepared to demonstrate against her."

Monsieur Grisson assumed a very grave expression.

"I too," he said, "have lost no time in endeavoring to solve the mystery of this North Sea incident. I have been in communication with the English Ambassador, and I have collected all the evidence possible.

There is absolutely no proof obtainable of the presence of any Japanese craft amongst the English fishing fleet. I submit, therefore, that this is a case for arbitration. I consider that up to the present our friends on the other side of the Channel have displayed commendable moderation in a time of great excitement, and I am happy to say that I have the authority of Lord Fothergill himself for saying that they will consent to submitting the affair to a commission of arbitration."

The President's words were received with chilling silence. It was the Prince, who, after a short silence, replied.

"Arbitration," he said coldly, "does not commend itself to us. We have been insulted. Our country and our gallant fleet have been held up to ridicule throughout the whole English Press. We are tired of being dictated to and bullied by a weaker Power — the openly declared ally of our enemy. England has long been seeking for a *casus belli* with us. At last she has found it."

Monsieur Grisson whispered for a moment to one of his colleagues. Then he turned once more to the Prince.

"Let us understand one another, Monsieur le Prince!" he said, "and you, Count von Munchen! You have come to announce to me your intention to jointly make war upon England. St. Petersburg is to refuse her demands, England will naturally strike at the Baltic Fleet, and Germany will send her fleet to the rescue, and at the same time land troops somewhere in the North of England. Russia, I presume, will withdraw her troops from Manchuria and strike at India!"

"No, no!" Count von Munchen protested. "I can

assure you, Monsieur, it is not our intention to land a single German soldier in England. We are interested only to see fair play to Russia. We require that the Baltic Fleet shall be allowed to go on its way without molestation."

The President faced the last speaker. His gray bushy eyebrows met in a frown.

"Then what, Count," he asked, "is the meaning of the mobilization of two hundred thousand men at Kiel? What is the meaning of your State railroads running west being closed last night to all public traffic? Why have you cabled huge orders for Government supplies? Why were you running trains all last night to the coast? Do you suppose that our secret service slumbers — that we are a nation of babies?"

The Count made an effort to retain his composure.

"Monsieur le Président," he said, "the reports which have reached you have been much exaggerated. It is necessary for us to back up our protests to England by a show of force!"

Monsieur Grisson smiled.

"Enough of this, gentlemen!" he said. "We will now talk to one another as men who have weighty affairs to deal with simply and directly. The story of the meeting between your two rulers which you, Prince Korndoff, have alluded to as a fairy tale, was a perfectly true one. I have known of that meeting some time, and I have certain proof of what transpired at it. The North Sea incident was no chance affair. It was a deliberately and skilfully arranged *casus belli*, although your admiral, Prince Korndoff, had to go one hundred miles out of his way to find the Dogger Bank fishing-fleet. You spoke to me last night of Cherbourg,

Prince. I think that after all your secret service is scarcely so successful as mine, for I can assure you that you will find there all that is to be found to-day at Kiel."

The Prince was amazed.

"But, Monsieur le Président," he exclaimed, "you cannot mean — you, our ally ——"

The President extended a forefinger.

"It was no part of our alliance," he said sternly, "that you should make a secret treaty with another Power and keep hidden from us no less a scheme than the invasion of England. My Cabinet have dealt with this matter on its own merits. I have the honor to tell you, gentlemen, that I have concluded an alliance with England to come into effect in the case of your carrying out your present intention. For every army corps you succeed in landing in England I too shall land one, only, I think, with less difficulty, and for every German ship which clears for action in the North Sea two French ones will be prepared to meet her."

"I think, Monsieur le Président," he said stiffly, "that this discussion had better be postponed until after I have had an opportunity of communicating with my Imperial master. I must confess, sir, that your attitude is a complete surprise to me."

"As you will, sir," the President answered. "I am perhaps more a man of affairs than a diplomatist, and I have spoken to you with less reserve than is altogether customary. But I shall never believe that diplomacy which chooses the dark and tortuous ways of intrigue and misrepresentation is best calculated to uphold and strengthen the destinies of a great nation. I wish you good morning, gentlemen!"

. . . . . .

For forty-eight hours the war fever raged, and the pendulum swung backwards and forwards. The cables between Berlin and St. Petersburg were never idle. There was a rumor, amongst those behind the scenes, of an enormous bribe offered to France in return for her neutrality alone. Its instantaneous and scornful refusal practically brought the crisis to an end. The German hosts melted away, and the Baltic Fleet passed on. St. Petersburg accepted the British demands, and a commission of arbitration was appointed. Henri de Bergillac read out the news from the morning paper, and yawned.

"*C'est fini — l'affaire Poynton!*" he remarked. "You can get ready as soon as you like, Guy. I am going to take you into Paris to your sister!"

Guy looked up eagerly.

"My pardon?" he asked.

The Vicomte made a wry face.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed, "I forgot that there were still explanations to make. Fill your abominable pipe, *mon ami*, and think that to-morrow or the next day you may be in your beloved England. Think how well we have guarded you here when a dozen men were loose in Paris who would have killed you on sight. Remember that in the underground history of England you will be known always as the man who saved his country. I shouldn't wonder in the least if you weren't decorated when you get home. Think of all these things — hard!"

"All right!" Guy answered. "Go ahead!"

"You never killed any one. The duel was a fake. You were — not exactly sober. That was entirely our fault, and we had to invent some plan to induce you

to come into hiding peacefully. *Voilà tout!* It is forgiven?"

Guy laughed a great laugh of relief.

"Rather!" he exclaimed. "What an ass I must have seemed, asking that old Johnny for a pardon."

The Vicomte smiled.

"The old Johnny, Guy, was the President of France. He wanted to know afterwards what the devil you meant."

Guy rose to his feet.

"If you tell me anything else," he said, "I shall want to punch your head."

The Vicomte laughed.

"Come," he said, "I will return you to your adorable sister!"

CHAPTER XV

A MERRY MEETING

MONSIEUR ALBERT was not often surprised, and still less often did he show it. The party, however, who trooped cheerily into his little restaurant at something after midnight on this particular morning, succeeded in placing him at a disadvantage.

First there was the Vicomte de Bergillac, one of his most important and influential patrons for many reasons, whose presence alone was more than sufficient guarantee for whoever might follow. Then there was the Marquise de St. Ethol, one of the *haute noblesse*, to welcome whom was a surpassing honor.

And then Monsieur Guy Poynton, the young English gentleman, whose single appearance here a few weeks back had started all the undercurrents of political intrigue, and who for the justification of French journalism should at that moment have been slowly dying at the Morgue.

And with him the beautiful young English lady who had come in search of him, and who, as she had left the place in the small hours of the morning with Monsieur Louis, should certainly not now have reappeared as charming and as brilliant as ever, her eyes soft with happiness, and her laugh making music more wonderful than the violins of his little orchestra.

And following her the broad-shouldered young Englishman, Sir George Duncombe, who had once enter-

tained a very dangerous little party in his private room upstairs, and against whom the dictum had gone forth.

And following him the Englishman with the heavy glasses, whom *l'affaire Poynton* had also brought before to his café, and with whom Mademoiselle from Austria had talked long and earnestly.

And lastly Monsieur Spencer, the English journalist, also with a black cross after his name, but seemingly altogether unconscious of it.

Monsieur Albert was not altogether at his best. Such a mixture of sheep and goats confused him. It was the Vicomte who, together with the head waiter, arranged a redistribution of tables so that the whole party could sit together. It was the Vicomte who constituted himself host. He summoned Monsieur Albert to him.

"Albert," he said, with a little wave of the hand, "these ladies and gentlemen are my friends. To quote the words of my charming young companion here, Monsieur Guy Poynton, whom you may possibly remember" — Monsieur Albert bowed — "we are on the bust! I do not know the precise significance of the phrase any more than I suppose you do, but it means amongst other things a desire for the best you have to eat and to drink. Bring Pomeroy '92, Albert, and send word to your chef that we desire to eat without being hungry!"

Monsieur Albert hurried away, glad of the opportunity to escape. Guy leaned back in his chair and looked around with interest.

"Same old place," he remarked, "and by Jove, there 's the young lady from Austria."

The young lady from Austria paid her bill and departed somewhat hastily. The Vicomte smiled.

"I think we shall frighten a few of them away to-

night!" he remarked. "The wine! Good! We shall need magnums to drown our regrets, if indeed our English friends desert us to-morrow. Monsieur Guy Poynton, unconscious maker of history and savior of your country, I congratulate you upon your whole skin, and I drink your health."

Guy drank, and, laughing, refilled his glass.

"And to you, the best of amateur conspirators and most charming of hosts," he said. "Come soon to England and bring your automobile, and we will conspire against you with a policeman and a stopwatch."

The Vicomte sighed and glanced towards Phyllis.

"In happier circumstances!" he murmured, and then catching the Marquise's eye, he was silent.

The band played English music, and the chef sent them up a wonderful omelette. Mademoiselle Ermine, from the Folies Bergères, danced in the small space between the tables, and the Vicomte, buying a cluster of pink roses from the flower-girl, sent them across to her with a diamond pin in the ribbon. The Marquise rebuked him half seriously, but he only laughed.

"To-night," he said, "is the end of a great adventure. We amateurs have justified our existence. To-night I give away all that I choose. Ah, Angèle!" he murmured, in her dainty little ear, "if I had but a heart to give!"

She flashed a quick smile into his face, but her forehead was wrinkled.

"You have lost it to the young English miss. She is beautiful, but so cold!"

"Do you think so?" he whispered. "Look!"

Phyllis was seated next Duncombe, and he too was whispering something in her ear. The look with

which she answered him, told all that there was to know. The Marquise, who had intercepted it, shrugged her shoulders.

"It is not worth while, my friend, that you break your heart," she murmured, "for that one can see is an affair arranged."

He nodded.

"After all," he said, "the true Frenchman loves only in his own country."

"Or in any other where he may chance to be," she answered drily. "Never mind, Henri! I shall not let you wander very far. Your supper-party has been delightful — but you see the time!"

They trooped down the narrow stairs laughing and talking. Duncombe and Phyllis came last, and their hands met for an instant behind the burly commissionaire.

"Until to-morrow!"

"Until to-morrow," she echoed softly, as he handed her into the electric *coupé*.

Andrew and he drove down the hill together. Duncombe was a little ill at ease.

"There is one thing, Andrew," he said, "which I should like to say to you. I want you to remember the night in your garden, when you asked me to come to Paris for you."

"Yes?"

"I warned you, did n't I? I knew that it would come, and it has!"

Andrew smiled in gentle scorn.

"My dear Duncombe," he said, "why do you think it necessary to tell me a thing so glaringly apparent? I have nothing to blame you for. It was a foolish dream

of mine, which I shall easily outlive. For, George, this has been a great day for me. I believe that my time for dreams has gone by."

Duncombe turned towards him with interest.

"What do you mean, Andrew?"

"I have been to see Foudroye, the great oculist. He has examined my eyes carefully, and he assures me positively that my eyesight is completely sound. In two months' time I shall see as well as any one!"

Duncombe's voice shook with emotion. He grasped his friend's hand.

"That is good — magnificent, Andrew!" he declared.

Their carriage rattled over the cobbled stones as they crossed the Square. The white mysterious dawn was breaking over Paris. Andrew threw his head back with a laugh.

"Back into the world, George, where dreams are only the cobwebs of time, and a man's work grows beneath his hands like a living statue to the immortals. I feel my hands upon it, and the great winds blowing. Thank God!"

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